“A SENSE OF TASTE WITH A SENSE OF PLACE:” COFFEE IDENTITIES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES AND EL SALVADOR

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In gratitude to everyone who helped out along the way. Thanks.

Deirdre
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INTRODUCTION

In 2004 the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) created a specialty coffee map, an online record of coffee producing farms around the world meant to, in the words of SCAA president, Ted Lingle, “connect a sense of taste with a sense of place” (Lingle 2004). Specialty coffee differentiates itself in the market as a product distinguished in quality and in terms of the emphasis placed on the singularity and traceability of its origin. “Relationship coffee” as some have called it, presents consumers with new individual and moral choices. While it privileges the social dimension of trade, it is still thoroughly a business decision. The humanitarian tone of Lingle’s editorial on relationship coffee is contrasted by the next article, a legal “how to” guide detailing how specialty coffee buyers can tactfully solidify these friendships in contracts. Read one after the other, the legal bullet points and Lingle’s lofty mission are confusing. It is in this confusion that contemporary consumers make their consumption decisions, connecting taste and place as material relations stand in for social experiences. Morals and markets meld as reflexive identities are formed.

The importance of global connection and local experience is echoed in the work of Arjun Appadurai who urges us to avoid essentialist language that parodies either extreme of the commodity chain (Appadurai 1986: 13). As commodities are necessarily situated in time and space, Appadurai argues that we must break from a production oriented analysis and look at the total trajectory from production to consumption (Appadurai 2005: 37). Appadurai also offers the idea of "ethnoscape" and opens the
realm of imagination in the face of modernity as a field of anthropological inquiry (Appadurai 1996: 33). Coffee allows us to explore the construction of individual and collective identities amidst diverse experiences with capitalism. By looking at production and consumption of coffee through its movement or exchange, we can better understand not only how the two processes are situated in relation to one another but also how meaning and knowledge are distributed.

While known for its coffee, El Salvador is better known for other things. Present in the public imagination as the home of the Mara Salvatrucha and the scene of the El Mozote massacre, the exemplar of 1980’s Central American civil war brutalities, it is a small country, roughly the size of New Jersey. Like many Central American countries, migration factors into the relationship between the United States and El Salvador; in 2006, the Central Bank estimated that 22.3% of Salvadoran families received remittances that totaled nearly $3.3 billion (U.S.Department of State 2008). The U.S. cultural flows that often accompany the movement of capital further connect the two countries but often reinforce the hegemonic relationship between what is broadly construed as the “first” and “third” world. In this global order, certain elements of El Salvador are absent, supplanted by other national visions. It is precisely this absence that makes El Salvador an ethnographic example of identity construction in the context of cultural and economic exchange.

Salvadoran exports of specialty grade coffee increased from 8% to 30% of total coffee exports between 2002 and 2006 with the United States purchasing the lion’s share.
Specialty coffee has altered the ways in which producers and consumers of coffee identify themselves in relation to one another. “Taste” and “place” become tropes that allow us to understand the trajectory of coffee culture in time and space where culture is a “… historical product and historical force—shaped and shaping, socially constituted and socially constitutive” (Roseberry 1989: 53). This assumes that humans are involved in the construction of meaning in their worlds and that history is not something that “arrives, like a ship, from outside the society in question” (Ortner 1984: 143).

**Methodology:**

The fieldwork for this project was conducted in El Salvador in the summers of 2006 and 2007 and in the United States at Murky Coffee in 2006. I was an observer at the Cup of Excellence, El Salvador and in 2007 remained in the country after the competition to conduct interviews with winning farms and translate farm histories for the Consejo Salvadoreño del Café to be used as promotional material in the online coffee auction. In 2007, I split my time between the city of Santa Ana and the capital, San Salvador, commuting daily to San Salvador to attend classes at the Consejo and accompany Consejo employees on farm visits. From these experiences, I present three ethnographic scenarios. The first focuses on U.S. consumers by providing a general history of U.S. coffee consumption patterns and the ways in which the new world of specialty coffee has impacted consumption decisions. The second section looks at elite identities in El Salvador and how the coffee elite choose to represent themselves, particularly in
reference to U.S. consumers. The third scenario provides a glimpse of the Cup of Excellence as an event dominated by U.S. buyers and English speaking judges that took place in El Salvador. The Cup of Excellence allows us to visualize and theorize the possibilities that the collision of “taste and place” offer.

My own positionality impacted my experience in El Salvador. I am a drinker of coffee (not always fairly traded or specialty) and a consumer of advertisement; as a first world consumer, I participate in the construction of meaning as I see and respond to the ways in which El Salvador envisions itself and is envisioned. Kirin Narayan reminds us: “...at this historical moment we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations” (Narayan 1993: 23). Complicating the category of what it means (or doesn’t mean) to be a “native” anthropologist, I locate myself both within and outside of the communities with whom I worked. I am a white, university-educated woman. I come from a small farm in Connecticut and speak Spanish as a second language. While agricultural practices and histories in El Salvador and in Connecticut are drastically different, I was able to connect with the Salvadoran coffee farming elite in part because of my own agricultural experience and in part because of the suite of privileges that my own class background afforded me. On another level, my gender and politics were constantly mined for meaning; as a woman and an academic, I was both benign and suspect. Why was I travelling alone? What was I writing? Did I like President Bush?
Sensing my liberal political inclinations, my friend and informant Julio Pacas jokingly called me his “little guerilla” as he introduced me to farming families whose incredulous facial expressions conveyed both warmth and offense. While he meant it as an insult and as a term of endearment, it was a label that followed me around and provoked nearly all of the coffee farmers with whom I talked to regale me with a laundry list of horrors that the guerilla had perpetrated, hoping desperately to make me understand. Nearly fifteen years after the peace accords that marked the end of the civil war, El Salvador remains polarized, graffiti and colored flags marking political territories. Wartime divisions still cleave Salvadoran politics as the former revolutionary guerilla group, the Farbundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional or FMLN) has gained political space much to the chagrin of the conservative National Republican Alliance party (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista or ARENA). The political inclinations of the Salvadoran coffee elite lean toward ARENA while the FMLN is generally described by coffee elite as the party of the masses; its very name is taken from the fallen peasant organizer, Farabundo Martí, who died in the 1932 peasant uprising and massacre, *La Matanza*. Though my political sympathies rested with the FMLN and their socialist vision for the country, it was the upper-class ARENA supporters that I had more in common with.

Methodologically speaking, coffee is an example of the importance of multi-sited fieldwork that takes into account multiple knowledges (Marcus 1995). Geopolitically,
coffee forces us to confront the asymmetries that are at the heart of the relationships between consumers and producers and within and across countries and regions. These are economic and social debates that have been rehearsed and reiterated through the years, the same questions that brought us Modernization Theory or contributed to André Gundar Frank’s (1967) theories on the “declining terms of trade” and Cardoso and Falletto’s (1979) Dependency Theory. These theories beg us to question the relationship between economics and culture while impressing upon us the importance of looking at advanced capitalist societies when we are studying the “economic periphery.” Finding Benson and Fischer’s *Broccoli and Desire* (2006) informative, I have tried to tread lightly, to conceptualize the relationship between consumers and producers as a dialectical one, a referential one as opposed to a relationship marked by absolute passivity or absolute resistance, absolute center or absolute periphery. I think we can also learn from Ellen Moodie who talks about looking at the “concrete consequences of systemic processes that distribute social conditions of existence” (Moodie 2006:64). Acknowledging the concrete consequences and distributions of existence allows us to interrogate the logic behind different realities and provide insight into the reasons that limit and empower the ways in which some regions and people participate in a global system.

This study is positioned at the intersection of commoditization theories which pan from production and consumption to exchange, showing the interconnectedness of seemingly independent processes that have often accompanied capitalist development.

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2 Modernization theorists drew heavily on Emile Durkeim’s *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893). Two notable modernization theorists were political scientists Samuel Huntington (1968) and Walt Rostow (1960).
Coffee is one avenue that allows us to explore the potential that the ethnographic method has in framing inquiries regarding commoditization. Drug foods (Mintz 1985) and their diverse commoditization processes require an examination of the “global” and the “local,” production and consumption, and require us to look at issues of structure and agency at the root of identity politics, as we grapple with the timeless anthropological questions of what makes us do what we do. Looking at “taste” and “place” in specialty coffee through deconstructing the identities behind a publicized consumer/producer dialogue is essential to understanding the individual and collective decisions that allow us as humans to respond to, create, and challenge the backdrops of our lives.

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3 Or, as Sherry Ortner has said it, in her explanation of a theory of practice: “What do actors want and how can they get it?” (Ortner in Ortner 1984)
CHAPTER I: CONSUMPTION

I am in a hotel room in San Salvador. It is the day before the winning lot will be decided in the Cup of Excellence, an international coffee competition. Pete, a cupper in the international jury, has invited me to taste a Yergacheffe from Ethiopia. During the weeklong event, he has refused to drink the coffee served at the hotel; the gangly twenty-something had brought his own grinder using bottled water to brew his own coffee fresh, daily. As we talk, he measures out a handful of beans, directs me to smell them and places them in the grinder. He carefully washes the coffee pot; he has had to make do with the small drip coffee machine at the hotel. Replacing the filter, Pete pours bottled water into the reservoir and waits for the coffee to brew. He hands me a cup and thoughtfully pauses before sipping: “If you gave this to someone without telling them it was coffee, they’d never know. It’s so thick, sweet...it’s amazing.” I took a deep breath and sipped, disappointed that it tasted like coffee to me.

Consuming Identities

Coffee is a microcosm of all of the major issues of the twenty-first century

Dean Cycon, owner and founder of Dean’s Beans Organic

William Roseberry has called coffee the “beverage of postmodernism” (Roseberry 1996: 763). It is a metaphor for capitalism and the changing social, political and cultural geographies that have marked capitalist development. A mundane drink, coffee has gone through several revisions of self, moving from a luxury good available to
a precious few to an indispensable and affordable staple back to its more recent emergence as a specialty item. In the United States, coffee has always reflected class difference and has mirrored U.S. capitalist development, bolstering a new industrial order through the emergence of the “coffee break” as the drink made its way to nearly every kitchen table (Jiménez 1995:41).

These shifts in demand and consumption signify important things about U.S. consumer culture, global economic processes and identity within the context of capitalist development. Conceptualizing coffee as more than a drink, we can look to Pierre Bourdieu who reminds us that “…art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Bourdieu 1984: 7). This upholding of social difference applies to consumer culture within the United States as well as to the asymmetrical relationship between consumers and producers in which identity is created.

Drawing on fieldwork conducted at Murky Coffee in Washington D.C. and in Arlington, Virginia, I have gained insight into the world of “coffee people” and the culture of the indie coffee shop. Murky exclusively sells Counter Culture Coffee, a small brand used by independent coffee shops along the Atlantic Coast. Based in Raleigh, North Carolina, Counter Culture has chosen not to market directly to consumers, preferring instead to sell exclusively to coffeehouses. This however, is changing with the 2007 openings of regional education and training centers in Atlanta, Georgia; Asheville, North Carolina; Durham, North Carolina and Washington DC. These centers act as
technical support for shop owners who sell Counter Culture but also have a community outreach agenda that allows consumers to directly purchase the product and participate in coffee seminars. As a relatively small coffee purveyor, Counter Culture’s slogan, “Coffee driven people, People driven coffee,” seems to highlight the (imagined) transnational link between coffee growers, and, at the opposite pole, U.S. consumers.

Considering the relationship between Counter Culture, Murky Coffee and ultimately, U.S. consumers underlines the importance of an industry-level ethnographic analysis of the consuming side of the specialty coffee world. If Counter Culture forces new dialogues on the industry level, Murky is equally distinguished at the local level. Owner Nick Cho reminds customers: “Our coffees are presented in a non-traditional but altogether more accurate and transparent way than most folks are used to.” This “non-traditional” presentation helps specialty coffee differentiate itself; this new transparency is meant to make consumers feel slightly awkward and slightly enlightened. Similarly, Susan Terrio has shown how French chocolate producers sought to differentiate their product in the face of increased regional integration and foreign competition noting “…more complex knowledge about consumption in turn demands more detailed knowledge about production as a crucial means to authenticate French claims of superior taste and quality” (Terrio 2000: 59). Specialty coffee struggles to differentiate itself in terms of “quality” and “transparency” and, this is in part reflected in its exclusionary price. Murky Coffee does not serve dark roasts or flavored coffees and provides consumers with what it considers to be “real coffee information,” detailing varietals, processing methods and origin. Murky’s mission statement captures its attitude: “Totally
committed to serving the people of Washington the best damn coffee there is. Yes. We said ‘damn.’” It is marketing that does its work through locating itself outside a world of hype. Truth is advertising in the marketing of anti-marketing.

How can marketing that expressly rejects the conventional while embracing it be ethnographically studied or conceptualized? Building upon the work of William Roseberry, I argue that marketing and education emerge as industry-level initiatives that merit a closer examination. Marketing and education can be read as “texts” that show how identity is tenaciously “…constituted, maintained, contested, represented, and reproduced through the practices and discourses of the people who perform it” (Terrio 2000: 8). Reflecting on consumer consciousness, Roseberry delves into the industry, reading trade journals “over the shoulders” of coffee men. Roseberry truly shows the importance of industry-level dialogue in the shaping of individual taste (Roseberry 1996:763). He focuses on agents of change and how they organized themselves, examining how the market itself has been restructured both in reference and in response to consumer needs.

Like Roseberry, my principal concern is at the industry and professional level. A trendsetting clique, “coffee people” are the ultimate coffee consumers and are responsible for producing dialogues regarding proper consumption, most basically what products should be consumed. Because of their role in the formation of collective demand, conversing with coffee professionals was essential to understanding the limits of consumer choice. Most of my fieldwork was conducted with these coffee professionals
as I gained entrance into the inner rings of their local worlds. Invoking Benson and Fischer’s definition of “local world” to refer to “social spaces in which something is at stake,” (2006:13) I draw heavily upon their work with Guatemalan broccoli farmers and U.S. broccoli consumers. In coffee, what is at stake differs depending on who you are and where you live.

Benson and Fischer link consumers and producers of broccoli in a commodity chain in which the desire for “something better” emerges as the stuff that involves people, sometimes unwittingly, in a global system. As they “map desire,” looking at why farmers choose to enter into the volatile commodity market (and why consumers choose to buy broccoli), they interrogate the concept of “something better” (2006:15). What does “better” mean? How do values and economics shape and grate against, interact with and penetrate culture? More importantly, how should these interrelated but often obscured concepts be studied? Benson and Fischer’s response is of great use to this project. They take what they call an “…existential approach in which people themselves relate what is important to them” (2006:13). This rings true in the world of specialty coffee which, like fair trade, is considered both a “movement and a market.” The search for quality and the direct producer-consumer relationships that are central to specialty coffee insert themselves into a history of commodity exports where shifting preferences impact both consumer demand and the dialectical processes of identity construction that takes place in both producing and consuming countries.

The Global, the Local and the Individual: A History of Consumption
Coffee is what Sydney Mintz (1985) has referred to as a “drug food.” Its drug properties have historically positioned it in the thick of debates surrounding morality, even before the advent of fair trade and specialty coffee pressed consumers to think critically about the origins of their beloved product. Originally from Africa, it made its way to Europe as the first coffee house opened in 1650 (Dicum and Luttinger 1999: 9). It was a medicinal substance widely used to treat opium addiction and “drunkenness” (Dicum and Luttinger 1999: 11). Nearly synonymous with colonialism, coffee has had a conflicted odyssey from Africa to Latin America and to the United States; it not only followed major trade routes in its travels but acted as the monocrop that supported many colonial endeavors. Most simply put, it is one of many products that is widely produced by the poorest countries in the world for consumption by the wealthiest (Dicum and Luttinger 1999:x).

Coming from England, coffee began to be consumed in the United States by elites along the Atlantic coast in the 1700’s (Jiménez 1995:39). Its consumption rapidly increased as processing and marketing of the bean developed in the mid-1800’s (Jiménez 1995:39). It became the beverage of western expansion. Though consumption remained steady in the period following the Civil War it was the Roaring Twenties when marketing practices transformed coffee from a luxury item into a modern staple, (Jiménez 1995: 39) with the result that coffee consumption in the United States mirrored capitalist development. Industrialization changed daily routines affecting who could consume and how the beverage was consumed (Jiménez 1995:39). During this period coffee was, however, unevenly experienced; quality control was largely nonexistent and the product was regionally differentiated and often adulterated (Jiménez 1995:41). With the advent
of the “coffee break” the beverage “…thus effectively became a handmaiden in the making of the new industrial order” (Jiménez 1995:49). Coffee did not simply solidify capitalist development within the United States; it was a commodity that fundamentally changed the average U.S. consumer’s relationship to the producers of foodstuff. Isolated American consumers ceased to be islands unto themselves and started to be citizens of a new, post-war world. Jimenez argues that the coffee lobby at the beginning of the twentieth century was the mechanism that promoted “economic cosmopolitanism” in the U.S. (Jiménez 1995:52). The coffee trade wanted to emphasize the interconnectedness of the global coffee market in an attempt to convince U.S. consumers that their choices contributed to international economic gain and livelihood (Jiménez 1995:52). The increase in consumption that accompanied industrialization also involved what Jimenez has called the “…dramatic expansion of the horizons of North American consumers into the global arena” (Jiménez 1995:56). This expansion prompted a specific kind of consciousness where coffee became part of a budding interest in the “developing world” although not through the genre of travelogues, as one might expect, but rather through the argument of global trade in the tropics as a “civilizing crusade” (Jiménez 1995:53).

There is general agreement that coffee quality and its value for the consumer (in terms of price) declined in the post-war period (Dicum and Luttinger 1999:135). To stabilize prices internationally and combat the decrease in value and taste for the average consumer, an International Coffee Agreement was signed in 1959 exclusively among producing countries (Talbot 2004:59). In 1962, the United States, a non-producer, signed the Inter-American Coffee Agreement, becoming one of several controlling members.
The agreement was created to help target over-production and assist producing countries in stabilizing their exports (Talbot 2004:60) Leaving the agreement in 1989, the United States contributed to the dissolution of the cartel which, in combination with the entrance of newer markets, (specifically Vietnam) sparked a coffee crisis that would last until nearly 2000 (Stein 2002: 210). Cheaper, low quality Robusta beans flooded the market severely impacting producers of higher “quality Arabica varietals” (Stein 2002:208).

Consumers were drinking lower quality coffee at a higher price while producers were barely able to cover the costs of production. The mid-crisis choices and responses of both consumers and producers in reference to each other reveals the dialectical relationship between production and consumption in an ever more connected and yet divided world.

Sydney Mintz explores similar tensions and dependencies, placing trends in consumption within processes of industrialization in *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985). It is an instructive example that looks at the interstices of capitalism, consumption and culture. Examining sugar, Mintz attempts to show how the “everyday” came about, how habits and rituals, meaning and social signification are learned behaviors that masquerade as natural or inherent categories. In looking at these processes through which meaning is constructed, Mintz reveals how both consumption and production solidified certain social circumstances and acted as ways of articulating socio-economic class and social status. Obsessed with the larger structures at play and the indelible marks they left on society, Mintz does not touch upon the innumerable ways in which individual lives were touched and individual choices were made as people negotiated the larger constraints of capitalism and the development of taste. A critical
In the book, Mintz asks whether each Briton decided to eat sugar or whether the larger systems at play (capitalism, trade) shaped their individual actions. He dismisses the idea of free will, stating that “asks an unjustified ingenuousness of us” (Mintz 1985:166).

In contrast, this individual impact is clearly present in the specialty coffee industry where the larger structures are often strategically reframed through their mystification. This creates a space where individual choice is inextricably linked to a partial consciousness of larger structures and the will to make one’s voice heard in a globally local way. When asked about the relationship between producers and consumers, one coffee roaster replied: “...the glue that sticks us all together is a love for coffee...we're all the same. We have the same hopes and dreams and wishes.” Consumption of specialty coffee appeals to this emotion of harmonious and unproblematic consumer-producer relationships. Consumers are required to be hyper-aware of the origins and personal relationships forged in and around coffee as they consume both the drink and the meaning that has been strategically and painstakingly ascribed to it.

The emergence of specialty coffee has been explained by various sources in differing terms. Talbot argues that while coffee (with notable exceptions) was dominated by big agro-business, a low price for consumers was the most important factor in creating a faithful following (Talbot 2004: 198). With price as the ultimate guide, quality deteriorated (Talbot 2004: 198). Even news personality Andy Rooney was bothered. Talking about what he viewed as his inalienable morning cup of coffee, he quipped:
“There are certain things in life we ought to be able to depend on.” His 2003 tirade criticized the industry of nickel- and-diming consumers through deceptive labels. Rooney’s contention was that a pound of commercial grade coffee no longer amounted to a “true pound” (Rooney 2003).

Aside from the obvious problem of higher prices being asked for less product, the industry also had to contend with an image problem: “Despite the best efforts of the industry, coffee continued to be viewed as an unexciting drink for fogies, or, at best, one of those ubiquitous staples that make no cultural statement at all” (Dicum and Luttinger 1999: 144). Coffee was not only decidedly unglamorous, for the first time in its illustrious career, it didn’t mean anything. In this moment of crisis, U.S. consumers were deliberately targeted by the coffee industry. Situated in the 1990’s, William Roseberry looks at a “fetishized” and alienated consumer who, being separated from productive forces, seeks out products that will provide a sense of human connection (Roseberry 1996:771-772). In an effort to revitalize demand and to incorporate previously peripheral groups, the coffee world began to look to gourmet coffee as a niche that could bolster decreasing demand and incorporate new consumer groups. The trade organization for Specialty Coffee, the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) defines specialty coffee: “Sometimes called ‘gourmet’ or ‘premium’ coffee, specialty coffees are made from exceptional beans grown only in ideal coffee-producing climates. They tend to feature distinctive flavors, which are shaped by the unique characteristics of the soil that produces them” (SCAA 2008).
Movement or Market?

As a luxury item of high quality, specialty coffee consumption legitimates certain taste preferences at the exclusion of others and allows us a glimpse into the world of modern consumers. Specialty coffee operates on two registers. It appeals to consumers’ moral preoccupations and distinguishes itself in terms of taste. Signifying important cues that reflect class in the United States, specialty coffee also shows how people imagine or are called upon to imagine themselves in relation to the producers of their coffee.

Specialty coffee is often confused with fair trade. The two are not mutually exclusive categories but they do differ significantly. Fair trade coffee ensures a minimum price for producers, requires fair labor conditions and encourages “direct trade” and the establishment of democratic organizations in order to stimulate community development and environmental sustainability (Transfair 2008). Although coffee, like many “tropical commodities” is a product of colonialism, the nature of coffee lends itself to fair trade in part because it is a “discrete physical commodity” that is minimally processed. This allows consumers to feel a more direct link between themselves and producers, specifically by knowing where their coffee came from (Jaffee 2007:15). Many of those interviewed expressed conflicting views on the divide between specialty coffee and fair trade. Most boutique roasters excori ate international certifying bodies who they claim have become obsolete. As one specialty coffee buyer remarked “It’s about quality in the cup and looking at a focus on environmental and social sustainability of farms which is important but we need to be critical that we don’t make the mistakes of certifying
bodies.” For example, Counter Culture does not purchase fair trade coffee. The company instead argues that the resulting personal relationships with farmers are “more sustainable” because they are “quality based” and reinforced through education that will ultimately allow the product to speak for and distinguish itself on the world market. Fair trade activists that I spoke with expressed distrust at companies who argued that they “did it better” while not adhering to fair trade. Fair trade generally impacts larger communities of growers and workers than does the world of boutique roasters and micro-lot coffee whose impact is quite small in the larger commodities market. This difference in scale and scope will become clear as we consider the size of Salvadoran farms and the structure of Salvadoran coffee farming.

In his book on fair trade, Dan Jaffee asks: “what is the market?” (Jaffee 2007:17) Reviewing Polanyi’s argument of “embeddedness” Jaffee shows that markets once formed part of larger systems but were not the organizing principle of the economy.

Now, with the advent of the “market economy,” markets have become disembedded—they are no longer in touch with social/cultural situations in which they previously found themselves, they replace them. In a disembedded market system, price is the only true signal that can be perceived as values become irrelevant. Jaffee looks to Block who created the concept of “marketness,” a term meant to describe the differing degrees to which price factors into exchange situations (Jaffee 2007:22). In this language, “low marketness” signifies that price is not the primary factor that affects or stimulates exchange. Usually accompanied by high embeddedness, “low marketness” places a premium on the human and social relations behind the market. To this we can add the
concept of “instrumentalism” which is the extent to which personal/individual economic gain is valued in exchange situations. In short, people might enter into long term business contacts (inherently low in marketness) because their need for dependability and connection is more important than potential economic gain (Jaffee 2007:23). It can be argued that humans are not fully economically rational nor are they fully unmoved by the power of price. Jaffee reminds us that is important to take a “…critical view of embeddedness that recognizes that price may still matter and that self-interest may be at work, sometimes in the midst of vigorous social ties” (Hinrichs in Jaffee 2007:23).

Thus specialty coffee and fair trade are both products with “low marketness” in which human connection emerges as a compelling force in the decision to consume or not to consume. Jaffee reminds us: “It is the ability of fair trade to put a face on commodities, to convey information about the social conditions under which they were produced—and about the people that produced them—that is key to the movement’s moral power” (Jaffee 2007: 14). While in El Salvador at the Cup of Excellence, a specialty coffee buyer echoed Jaffee’s statement: “We’re pushing the envelope in an industry that hasn’t been willing to change in a long time. You do start building relationships. Even if you don’t sign contracts you’ll see their faces.”

This human connection, read morally, stresses the importance of knowing the “where” and the “who” of a mundane product; the industry is breathing life into something which has historically been anonymous and undifferentiated. The moral rhetoric of “traceability” stresses the importance of “the face.” At the Cup of Excellence,
judges spoke about how meeting coffee farmers and telling consumers at home about their experiences “put a human face on it.” Always eager for a photo opportunity, in El Salvador the Consejo attempted to connect a “name and a face” in every picture it took to be used in promotional material. Most often, at each turn, a young hip farmer or barista ingénue seemed to be “the (new) face of coffee.” Consumers are increasingly motivated by these stories behind the cup.

To assume that demand for specialty coffee increased simply because consumers were told what to drink is to simplify the process through which collective desire is formed and articulated. Unlike Adorno, I believe looking at the industry level is important in understanding the ways in which advertising and those in charge conceptualize consumers. This is the case because advertising both informs and is informed by culture. Coffee people are at the core of the politics behind what Appadurai would call “tournaments of value,” or the stops that dot the social life of any object and direct its path and trajectory (Appadurai 1986:21). These stops infuse the product with value and represent concentrations of power whose operations impact the ways in which objects are valued, consumed and exchanged.

In looking at demand, the individual is precariously positioned. If demand is often collective, where does individual choice factor in, especially in the world of specialty

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4 Adorno, however, would disagree with Roseberry’s analysis of the coffee industry. He reminds us in “How to Look at Television” that “To study television shows in terms of the psychology of the authors would almost be tantamount to studying Ford cars in terms of the psychoanalysis of the late Mr. Ford” (Adorno 2001:168). I respectfully disagree and think that Roseberry (1996) and Daniel Miller (1994) show that an industry level analysis is quite helpful in understanding how demand is both a marketing creation in response to culture and a cultural creation in response to marketing.
coffee where individuality looms large as a selling mechanism? Even the name Counter Culture Coffee alludes to this individuality; it inspires a revolutionary rejection of the conventional and a restructuring of what has historically been a conservative industry. Consumers can take part in this revolution simply by what they choose to drink. As Garret Keizer has wryly commented on the American middle-class fascination with and activism pertaining to global warming: “…wonder of wonders; you can now download all of your convictions into this one lightweight, handheld device” (Keizer 2007:9). One Counter Culture pamphlet for its “Source” line is formatted as a thank you note to customers: “Thank you for supporting the fair, sustainable relationships behind our seasonal selection of authentic delicious coffees.” “Authentic and Delicious” and “Fair and Sustainable” span across the flipside of the 3x5 note filling the space on the recycled paper leaflet.

Counter Culture’s claims to challenge “business as usual” do not operate in a vacuum; they occur within the confines of pre-existing structures. In decoding how actors negotiate the larger systems in which they live, we can look to Paula Mathieu's conceptualization of capitalism as “…the boundaries in which citizens can act and effect change in their local communities” (Mathieu 1999:112). In capitalism, Mathieu suggests that we have become part of an “economic citizenship” regime in which our consumption choices speak to our moral and ethical sensibilities; we vote with our money (Mathieu 1999:112). In looking at the links between neo-liberalism, globalization and violence, Ellen Moodie provides us with an appropriately technocratic phrase. Chillingly speaking of the dehumanized environment of a post-war El Salvador she remarks: “values were
being recalibrated through globalization” (Moodie 2006:67). Is the potency and vibrancy of what we believe expressed through the things we choose (or don’t choose) to buy?

Fair trade activist Joe Curnow had something to say about that: “Half of the work of fair trade these days is moving beyond the star-struck-we’re-helping-people feeling. There’s a lot of label searching [for fair trade certified] and people buy it hook, line and sinker. It’s an easy thing [to do] almost as if you’re not being complicit in the direct exploitation of folks but you’re choosing an alternative that supports livelihood.” For Fischer and Benson, mining the meanings and processes of desire becomes part of an “existential approach” that attempts to go beyond rational choice or social construct theories that explain human behavior either in terms of basic need or socially constituted wants (Fischer 2006:13) In this sense, desire is what links, transcends and defines human interaction across global systems.

In our consumer society, awareness of origins is increasingly more difficult to achieve. As Susan Terrio (2000) shows in her book *Crafting the Culture and History of French Chocolate*, consumers in a post-industrial world are often painfully unaware of where the products they consume come from. Increasing emphasis is placed on singularity and traceability, two central preoccupations that can be observed on the Counter Culture website where the “Origins” section includes travelogues from “coffee people” who have intrepidly ventured into the global south in search of quality and human connection. Often, origins cannot be fully traced and, even if they can, our understanding as consumers can only ever be partial. In this disconnect, mythologies
emerge (Appadurai 1986:48). These mythologies fuel our imaginations and connect us to far off places and people. Mythologies come full circle as coffee people transmit these disparate narratives to consumers through relating personal experiences in an attempt to humanize the material relations on which we depend and in which we unconsciously take part.

**Educating Consumers: The Pan American Coffee Bureau**

Consumer consciousness is not a new phenomenon. In the past, it was based on a different kind of relationship between the Global South and North American consumers. In 1954, The Pan-American Coffee Bureau began its “How to Make Good Coffee Campaign.” One of the artifacts of this campaign, informally credited with the creation of the term “coffee break,” was a small activity book directed at school aged children called *Coffee: The Story of a Good Neighbor Product* (Pan-American Coffee Bureau 1954). The workbook starts in the form of a letter penned by “the boys and girls of Latin America.” The pamphlet invites children to “visit” the region. This visit is a symbolic one, achieved through emphasizing material relations between “The New World” or the “United Americas.” The letter begins with a tentative curiosity: “...we know you want to learn more about us because you show in so many ways how interested you are in Latin America.” It continues:

*You dance to our rhythmic music. The rhumba, the conga and the samba are three of your most popular dances.*

*You admire our colorful clothes, and use them to design your own bright sandals and gay bandanas and costume jewelry.*
You use our nitrates to make fertilizers for your farms and gardens, our tin to protect your foods in cans.

You eat and drink from our pottery, and use it to decorate your homes.

Coffee is one of the most popular beverages known to man. This, too, is a product of Latin America and it’s just as popular here as in North America. We use it not only as a beverage but also as a flavoring for many of our favorite dishes. So we’re going to use coffee to tell our story.

And now, “Hasta Luego” or “Ate Logo”....until we meet you on the coffee plantation

(Pan-American Coffee Bureau 1954)

The pamphlet has an activity section with fill in the blank quizzes, color-coded maps and pictures of coffee plantations with blanks underneath that children were encouraged to explain. The way in which the Good Coffee campaign did its work is a demonstration of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism. The lives and stories of individuals are absorbed by coffee; coffee itself stands in for human relations. It represents a human relationship across geographical regions and yet brings about the erasure of the human element.

The pamphlet details the agricultural categories of coffee and the ways in which it is farmed, processed and roasted. The plantation is a happy, exotic place: “... a fazenda or finca, is practically a little community in itself.” Coffee becomes a metonym for Latin American culture and economics. On the eve of the Cuban Revolution and in the midst of the Cold War, young Americans were exhorted to be good neighbors and, to those ends, were educated to be consumers. The seemingly innocuous coloring book emerges as a powerful treatise that enshrines the inequalities of global commodity trade; it is a time
capsule that has frozen consumption, capitalism and global connection in a 1950's vernacular.

Advertising and education have changed over time, incorporating new methods and priorities. One element that remains consistent is the way in which advertising, in the 1950's and today, has been marked by elisions and silences. Terrio defends both as important areas of inquiry especially when looking at how identity is manifested in written, visual and performatative texts (Terrio 2000:8,17). What an advertising campaign or an educational program does not say is nearly as important as what is said. Today silences continue to mark narratives of production in an industry that is pursuing practices that attempt to integrate transparency and fairness into what has historically been an opaque and exploitative venture. In a very real way, the people who have authorship over the “stories behind the cup” shape the forms in which global connections are recorded and accessed.

**Coffee Cowboys and Javatrekkers: Counter Culture Coffee**

Next to money and guns, the third largest North American export is the U.S. idealist, who turns up in every theater of the world: the teacher, the volunteer, the missionary, the community organizer, the economic developer, and the vacationing do-gooders. Ideally, these people define their role as service. Actually, they frequently wind up alleviating the damage done by money and weapons, or "seducing" the "underdeveloped" to the benefits of the world of affluence and achievement. Perhaps this is the moment to instead bring home to the people of the U.S. the knowledge that the way of life they have chosen simply is not alive enough to be shared.

Monsignor Ivan Illich, 1968, *To Hell With Good Intentions*
Counter Culture Coffee is what *Food and Wine Magazine*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have referred to as a boutique coffee roaster. Voted among the top five boutique roasters in *Food and Wine* in 2006, Counter Culture has recently introduced its “Source” line of coffee. Direct-trade, single estate, micro-lots and sourcing are common phrases in the boutique roasting world that emphasize a new way of doing business. Counter Culture and its competitors, Stumptown, Intelligentsia, Terroir and Barefoot coffee, use these phrases to reposition themselves in the coffee world as purveyors of quality coffee that is the product of long term relationships and what they defend as sustainable agricultural practices. Counter Culture and boutique roasters are not alone in the project of traceability. Even Starbucks has developed its own “Source” line; Black Apron Exclusives. Due to the size of Starbucks, Black Apron Exclusives are fundamentally different from the micro-lots of smaller roasters. Differences excluded, that Starbucks has decided to develop a line of relatively transparently traded coffee is indicative of industry level dialogues that are emerging among roasters of all sizes directed at modern consumers. Dan Jaffee has shown that a key problem with the increasing popularity of Fair Trade is its susceptibility to corporate cooptation by agro-industrial giants who see its potential as a niche market (Jaffee 2007:4). While Black Apron Exclusives does not occupy the same niche as fair trade, its presence on the shelf at Starbucks demonstrates the same potential for corporate cooptation. On a smaller scale, “Direct trade,” coined by Geoff Watts of Intelligentsia and “Source,” Counter Culture’s single-estate line, are the work of a new type of coffee maverick who must literally travel the world in search of new coffees.
This sense of global connection and tireless searching was captured in a 2007 New York Times article: “To Burundi and Beyond for Coffee’s Holy Grail.” Interviewing Duane Sorenson of Stumptown, Geoff Watts of Intelligentsia and Peter Giuliano of Counter Culture, the New York Times captures the jet-setting lives of coffee people. The alliterative title and the reference to the “holy grail” tell a great deal about the new age of coffee. The title emphasizes the traditional disconnect between producers and consumers, the mystification of production. The action of traveling to Burundi (which, in the case of the article, stands in for the distant exotic, characteristically embroiled in civil conflict) involves coffee professionals in a global enterprise. But what is “Coffee’s Holy Grail?” On a never-ending quest, the holy grail of coffee can be seen as a reinvention of tradition and a search for “authentic” artisanal production methods that ensure a product of the highest quality. In short, authenticity emerges as part of this new coffee world. “Coffee’s Holy Grail” alludes to the process of re-educating producers in countries that have traditionally grown coffee but who have, in the last century, been co-opted by conglomerates in search of low prices and high profit margins. This mythological title tells us about the nature of the relationship between boutique roasters and the producers with whom they interact. It also obliquely involves consumers in this relationship; the article, while educational, is a form of publicity. Its intended audience is comprised of people who may very well already drink or know about specialty coffee.

In the fall of 2007, Counter Culture Coffee held the grand opening for its Regional Training Center located in Washington DC. The center, nestled in a newly renovated office building in the neighborhood of Adams Morgan, is an opportunity for
the small brand to begin marketing directly to consumers. The purpose of the center is two-fold: to provide technical support to small coffee shops that use Counter Culture and to educate consumers in how to properly choose, prepare and enjoy coffee. The center involves coffee connoisseurs and the uninitiated alike. Coffee drinkers from all walks of life are invited to participate in Friday morning open “cupping sessions” that act both as an educational forum and as an artful sales exercise. The center’s broadness in scope falls in line with one of Counter Culture’s several slogans: “We’re not trying to change the world, just the way it thinks about coffee.” The pithy statement shows how the paradoxes of specialty coffee consumption can be understood using Benson and Fischer’s concept of limit points. Limit points, embodied in “at least” statements limit the prospects of change by accepting and acquiescing to the status quo and operating within the accepted norms that channel our collective desires (Benson and Fischer 2006: 15). Discourses of quality on the consumption end are just that, limit points. They accept the industry as it is and affect change not through a total restructuring but by accepting things as they are: coffee is exploitative but quality and direct trade are at least ways of making it a bit less so.

In a seminar given by Peter Giuliano, co-owner of Counter Culture, this sense of dramatic and exotic encounter came to the fore. Giuliano is a stocky man, his face marked by dark, designer frame glasses. He wore a light blue shirt with dress pants, walking the line between business casual and casual, occasionally and absentmindedly smoothing his shirt as he talked. The room was filled with more than sixty people who had come to Counter Culture’s DC training center to attend part of a series called “Meet
the Farmer.” The audience was comprised of a cadre of local shop owners and baristi and a few people who, seeing the sign outside had wandered, as if lost, into the room. Many of those in attendance were well acquainted, having worked with Counter Culture and Peter previously as a result of being small business owners in and around DC. After tapping the keg, two baristi from Murky began serving wine and beer—the beer of course, had been specially selected from a local micro-brewery.

Introducing the event as a “slideshow conversation” Giuliano guided participants on a tour of the coffee world from Ethiopia to Papua New Guinea, from Sumatra to Colombia. The event was meant to introduce Counter Culture’s line of “Source” coffees and to allow people to sample the different beans after having learned where they came from. Giuliano talked about his twenty years of experience in the industry, having started out as a barista. He credited his undergraduate background in anthropology as what allowed him to appreciate the cultural elements of trade, a recurring theme throughout his two-hour presentation and what he argued separated Counter Culture from other roasters and importers. Through his discussion on coffee, Giuliano talked about the political and cultural contexts in which different farmers lived. In addition to the new emphasis placed on traceability, Giuliano argued that specialty coffee and development go hand in hand: “Coffee trade lends stability and prevents these sort of things...[genocide in Rwanda]. We’re not there yet, still trying to establish stability. Coffee needs stability to work. Political stability and coffee go hand in hand. You can’t have one without the other.” His speech set up the often debated connection between specialty coffee and activism, between what some consider “a movement and a market.” Considering Giuliano’s words
in light of Dan Jaffee’s analysis, we can understand that not unlike fair trade, specialty coffee is considered by many industry level actors to be both a movement and a market.

Today, education in coffee blends the importance of specialized product knowledge with lessons in proper consumption practices. At the industry level, coffee seminars and education programs are meant to help coffee people become more knowledgeable about the products they sell while outreach programs are intended to make consumers more aware of the products they buy. Oftentimes, the goal of education is to deepen local coffee culture by stimulating consumption and by creating a new sort of conscious consumer. Not unlike the 1950's letter from the boys and girls of Latin America, education today fixates on global origins and on product quality incorporating technical language and upholding the importance of local knowledge. Looking at education could provide us with the ability to demystify the origins that are enmeshed in created mythologies. Or, as Terrio found in the case of French chocolatiers, product promotion can be “…a strategic manipulation of the gaps in knowledge that accompany the entry and flow of goods in national and global markets” (Terrio 2000:59).

Postcards, pamphlets and leaflets dotted the countertops of the room. Each farm visited in Giuliano’s presentation had a postcard that attendees were encouraged to take home. The front featured a photograph of the farm or surrounding area and Counter Culture’s logo for the product which often incorporated local designs. Finca Mauritania, Santa Ana showed a dirt road quietly wending into the distance and off the card. The caption: “The road through Finca Mauritania in El Salvador. Coffee nirvana.” The back
of each card was punctuated by a small map that showed the country of origin, with a star marking the particular town or region from which the brew came. It was as if to say that in drinking coffee a consumer mailed off a postcard, checking a country off the interminable list of “places visited;” it was something to truly write home about, to tell of one’s travels.

**The Sacrilege of Cream and Sugar**

While education operates at the industry level, it makes its home in local coffee shops through employees, particularly baristi. Baristi are the ultimate consumers; they are coffee fanatics who are the last stop of quality control. According to many roasters, they are ultimately responsible for the final taste experience. They ask the consumer: Rwandan or Salvadoran? Willing to explain the benefits of different varietals and brewing processes and ready to justify the merits of a four-dollar latte, baristi are the face behind the cup, the charismatic end point of the narrative of each farm whose beans they sell. They know how to consume, warning consumers against the sacrilege of cream and sugar. Challenging conventional coffee consuming wisdom, baristi gently steer people away from old habits, urging them to try and appreciate new products.

Understanding the specialized knowledge of the barista is important in understanding the links in the commodity chain. As Arjun Appadurai tells us: “If we regard some commodities as having “life histories” or “careers” in a meaningful sense, then it becomes useful to look at the distribution of knowledge at various points in their careers”
In recognizing this “distribution of knowledge” we can gain insight into how people understand their role in the consumption process.

Thornstein Veblen’s critique of the “Leisure Class” lends itself to an exploration of career baristi and the independent coffee shop. Exposing the paradoxes of capitalism, Veblen looks at productive waste, exploring the political economy of leisure. If humans are rational actors looking to maximize their utility, how can one explain the consumption of non-essential and particularly ostentatious products in late capitalism? (Veblen 2008). Looking to Veblen, we can see that the coffee shop is an affectation of absolute leisure, a performance of class and craft identity. It is a place where a luxury product is consumed and where time is rendered irrelevant and productivity is secondary to the experience of consumption. As Michael Jiménez has put it: “Coffee stood, Januslike, at the intersection of cultural processes which simultaneously separated and conjoined work and leisure at a critical moment in the emergence of a modern consumer society in the United States” (Jiménez 1995:56).

The perfect hangout, the independent coffee shop becomes a place to conspicuously waste time while buying an experience and engaging in “easy activism” (Jaffee 2007). Another element of leisure is manifested in the newly created social space of the US “career barista.” Although career baristi have existed in other societies (most notably, Italy), the career barista in the United States is a recent phenomenon (Grier 2006). Identity emerges among people who define themselves through their relationship to coffee. They have created an aesthetic code, not only of self, but of the presentation of
coffee. In this performance of identity, barista act according to an implicit set of practical rules that guide behavior, or what Bourdieu has called the “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984). Coffee is an extension of self; latte art is only one facet of this performed identity. Latte art is an inscription on the commodity, an ephemeral design fashioned out of foamed milk. Baristi perform their art behind the coffee bar and project an image replete with its own musical preferences, clothing choices and hairstyles. Baristi in independent coffee shops resist being “institutionalized”; eschewing Starbucks and its platform of corporate responsibility, health benefits and 401k’s. Baristi are important; they are both the barometers of demand and the creators of taste.

The barista is no longer a glorified waiter but rather an educator, a highly skilled “coffee chef” who is ultimately responsible for the consumption experience. SCAA member Joe Curnow confided in me, “If you get a bad cup of coffee, ninety percent of the time it’s not because the coffee is actually of poor quality.” Because of this position at the end of the commodity chain Mathieu remarks that baristi are often the “stars,” the incarnation of a material relationship between producers and consumers (Mathieu 1999:117). In one of his slideshow conversations Peter Giuliano pointed out that the barista is a key element in creating developed coffee cultures. In interviews with industry actors, each person emphasized the importance of the barista. One head judge and ex-Starbucks executive remarked that “The bean could be the best in the world but if it is brewed incorrectly, it doesn’t matter.” In this sense, baristi are powerbrokers not only within the domain of the coffee shop but often, they are the ones who pursue direct trade relationships and are courted by farmers in an attempt to influence buying relationships.
If, as Roseberry argues, the fetishized consumer has become nothing more than a chooser, baristi are the actors who frame the choices; They ask you Yergecheffe or Bourbon, Ethiopia or El Salvador, medium or dark roast.

Professionalization of the barista is an important on-going process that reflects our changing attitudes surrounding commodities. Jacob Grier, a DC barista has given some perspective on the possibilities of career baristi. According to Grier, in other countries, most notably Australia and Italy, baristi can earn up to 78,000 a year and are generally older (average age in Italy is 48). Grier blames this disparity between U.S. baristi and those abroad on a less developed “coffee culture.” He reminds his blog readers: “Consumer education strikes me as the larger priority. When Americans demand more from their coffee perhaps then we’ll see barista wages rise to compensate talent in a discerning market” (Grier 2006). Like Susan Terrio’s French chocolatiers, virtual artisans caught in a society that upholds the importance of formal education and white-collar values, baristi also occupy a liminal space in a late capitalist society (Terrio 2000: 191).

In a society where college education has become commonplace, the barista is an artisan, working with what Terrio might refer to as a “craft commodity.” Coffee is purer than chocolate and, by extension, less vulnerable to adulteration. Its proper preparation and roasting requires specialized knowledge and skill. Roasting coffee and making latte art are not easy. As one advertisement for a barista competition declared: “You can’t do this with tea.” This artisan knowledge is based on a perceived close connection to the source; baristi may not pick the exact beans that end up in their roast, but often they
maintain personalized connections with farmers. Latte art itself is often self-conscious and socially critical: Grier once, in an attempt to infuse originality into his foamed milk creation made a rosetta design in a paper cup from Starbucks; a humorous gesture that is only funny if you understand the incongruities at the industry level. Specialty Coffee people believe that there is nothing funnier than a unique rosetta design made from the world’s finest coffee in a paper cup marked with an infamous brand known for its standardized brews with poor taste profiles. An inside joke indeed.

**Conclusion:**

Specialty coffee differentiates itself in terms of quality on several levels. According to its rhetoric, it ensures quality of life for farmers, quality of product for consumers and quality of presentation within the larger industry. In all senses, quality is marked by a visceral connection to the source. This imagined connection between the raw product and the final milk adorned latte is linked together by baristi narratives of production, a moment where the silences of farmers are filled in by powerful ghostwriters.

Avoiding a Marxian focus on production, or Veblen or Bourdieu’s focus on consumption, Arjun Appadurai looks at objects in motion, arguing that this is what imbues things with value. Appadurai instructs us in a working definition, showing us that a “commodity” is a socially and symbolically situated thing (Appadurai 2005:38). Appadurai argues that “The commodity situation in the social life of any ‘thing’ be
defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (Appadurai 2005:38).

With exchange as the focus, Appadurai attempts to “demystify demand.” Thus, demand is not merely a natural response to availability; it is a social process. Commodity, linked to consumption and production, emerges as a continuum of meaning, value, use and exchange, all of which must be temporally situated and contextualized. U.S. coffee consumption has historically forced us to examine our consuming selves in reference to distant, producing others. A metaphor for global connection, the backbone of capitalist transformation and a cultural medium, coffee and its consumption is a mirror into collective and individual identities that are historically born and constantly evolving.
CHAPTER II: THE ÁLVAREZ FAMILY OF SANTA ANA

This chapter will examine the historically constituted elements of Salvadoran coffee society and how dynastic families both accommodate and resist the changes and demands that accompany the new selling opportunities that specialty coffee presents. As they find themselves interacting directly with foreign buyers and consumers, Salvadoran elite have to contend with conflicting imaginings of El Salvador. Using auto-ethnographic farm histories and publicity material, I consider how people choose to represent themselves through paying attention to the ways in which they navigate negative perceptions of their country and class while acting in reference to the changing demands and desires of the consuming other.

Las Catorce: Salvadoran Coffee Families

When asked whether he could imagine working in any other industry, Angel Battle, member of a large coffee producing family, gasped. Spitting red wine, he turned and began to speak: “When I bleed, I bleed coffee. I have coffee in my veins.” Angel was one of several hundred farmers in attendance at the 2006 Cup of Excellence awards ceremony. Though his farm did not place in the top twenty-three, he glowed at the mention of his niece’s farm which had placed in the top twenty at the inaugural El Salvador Cup of Excellence in 2003. Battle’s intense words reflect his membership in a coffee producing society where coffee farming is not something you do but rather, something you are.
Jeffrey Paige’s 1997 work, *Coffee and Power* paints a vivid picture of the role Central American coffee producers had in the civil conflicts of the 1980's and later, in the peace and reconciliation processes that marked regional transitions to democracy. Coffee in this context is concomitant with a focus on “coffee dynasties,” illuminating the interplay between coffee and power (both political and social) and, more geopolitically, the relation between the export of commodities and poverty and inequality. Analyzing coffee elites in El Salvador, Paige introduces the genealogy of coffee production, the notorious “fourteen family dynasty” of growers who, as popular legend has it, have controlled Salvadoran coffee production and export for the last hundred years. Paige admits that while the myth of the fourteen families (“Las Catorce”) is largely a journalistic invention, the families themselves are quite real (Paige 1997:18).

Paige has also argued that coffee itself was the cause of El Salvador’s civil war and that it continues to be the mechanism that maintains the extreme political and social inequality that characterizes the country (Paige 1993). More specifically, El Salvador’s high population density and extremely unequal land distribution, both contributed to and exacerbated by coffee production, are cited as underlying reasons for the war (Seligson 1994: 44). It is impossible to talk about coffee without talking about a history of violence.

My fieldwork in El Salvador was shaped by my interactions with one “dynastic family,” the Álvarez family. They welcomed me into their homes and onto their farms. I

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5 The families are: Dueñas, Regalado, Hill, Meza Ayau, De Sola, Sol Millet, Guirola, Álvarez, Meléndez, Menédez Castro, Deininger, Quiñónez, García Prieto and Vilanova.
met several family members separately before discovering that they were related, a dramatic irony that further illustrates the twists and turns of inheritance, ownership and surname.⁶

Julio Pacas Álvarez, my friend and teacher at the Consejo Salvadoreño del Café (CSC or Consejo) was the nephew of Diego Álvarez, my host in Santa Ana. The previous year, I had met Emilio Lopez and his wife Cristina, owners of Finca El Manzano, also without knowing their relation to Diego or Julio (nephew and cousin, respectively). In many ways, the Salvadoran coffee experience that I had was filtered through my relationship with the Álvarez family as they acted as my guides, hosts and friends.

I divided my time between San Salvador and Santa Ana, living in Santa Ana and commuting daily to San Salvador to attend coffee workshops and collaborate with the Consejo collecting farm data for the Cup of Excellence while accompanying Julio on quality control inspections. I reference Diego, Julio and Emilio as the gatekeepers of my experience; without the weight of their last name, I doubt that anyone would have granted me entrée into the concertina wired world of coffee farms and mills. I do not portend to argue that Julio, Diego and Emilio are representative of coffee society only that, as members of a particular and well known family, they actively participate in it in distinct ways. Julio has joined the ranks of government coffee employees at the Consejo while

⁶ Because of the importance of the “family name” and the significance of being an Álvarez, one of the fourteen families, I have not changed the surname. In all cases where family history is public knowledge, I refer to people by name. I have chosen to use pseudonyms for two of my main informants, out of respect for them.
Diego retains half of his mother’s farm and runs a hostel in Santa Ana. Emilio has taken the family farm and has established his own label, “Topéca.” He has eliminated the middle man; he mills, roasts, farms and exports his own coffee.

In addition to Diego, Julio and Emilio, the Álvarez family’s businesses, Beneficio El Borbollon, Finca Malacara and Topéca Coffee, reflect the family’s business acumen and the manner in which the Álvarez family publicly envisions and presents itself. They also highlight the presence that the Álvarez family has within the Salvadoran coffee world. The continuity of their last name and the tension between family members regarding differing involvements in coffee, allows us to gain insight into macro-processes of cultural tension at the micro-level, and the accompanying ways in which individuals choose to participate in their world and represent themselves. This is a story of identity.

Santa Ana and Los Álvarez: Cafetalero Identity

The men of Santa Ana’s society, of course, have the Casino, with its garish black rafters and egg-yellow walls...Don Joaquin (3,600 acres and 100,000 quintales of coffee) is at his table...Raul Hernandez (250 acres and 6,000 quintales) comes out of the treasurer’s office where he has spent the last two hours checking the books

Claribel Alegría, Ashes of Izalco

Claribel Alegría wrote Ashes of Izalco in 1989. A fictionalized account of the peasant rebellion and massacre of 1932, the novel stands as a representation of early Twentieth Century Santa Ana, the western hub of coffee production in El Salvador. Alegría herself grew up in a coffee producing family. Her description of the sleepy city that lies in the shadow of the Izalco Volcano rings true today. The casino, open only to socios
(members) and their guests, is nestled on a side street near the main square; it has become the local bar of the new generation of coffee elite. For younger santanecos, a good night out begins and ends at the Casino. Julio and Emilio frequented the Casino, both ordering drinks and food on open tabs that were delivered monthly to their homes. Diego though, swore that he would never enter “that place” and referred to its employees as “mummified,” having worked there since the beginning of time. The casino was openly rejected by Diego who, like a father, impressed upon me that it was dangerous and filled with people of ill repute. He reminisced about the war years, when there were parties “toque a toque,” where people gathered in individual homes from the nighttime curfew until morning.

The old class indicators (such as membership at the Casino) are being re-embraced by a new generation while they are actively rejected by the generation that came of age prior to the civil war. The new lot of casino goers has become more diverse and now overwhelmingly includes those whose wealth comes from the industrial sector, particularly the heirs of maquila owners. Women are now allowed inside and the bar has become a social scene as opposed to strictly a gentleman’s club. When sitting at the Casino one feels this tension between old and new wealth and among generations. The central area is reserved for older gentlemen who calmly smoke cigars while the backroom has been converted to a disco of sorts with pounding music and lights. While out one night, Julio was standing at the bar when a non-member pushed him. Julio confronted the man, asking who he was and who he had entered with. The scene escalated as the man

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7 Santaneco refers to people from Santa Ana.
pulled a gun on Julio. The room divided, hushed while Julio’s friends coaxed him away from the scene. The startled Casino employees who had known Julio his entire life and appreciated his family’s patronage came to his aid, assuring him that they would throw the other man out. In the end, Julio left, seething about the experience: “Does he know who I am?” he repeated as we drove away. Like the parenthetical remarks of Alegría’s narrator, Carmen, a person’s worth is linked to a silent (or not so silent) acknowledgement of his or her last name and the amount of assets they possess. It is not a simple question of money. It is the effortlessness with which certain people can enter and move about and the apprehension and tension that mark the room’s reaction to a new face.

Santa Ana is the second largest city in El Salvador after San Salvador. It took a very short time to realize exactly how small the city was; soon everyone knew me, the *gringa* who was always accompanied by Julio. If my actions were under the microscope, so were those of my informants. Members of a family who emigrated from Colombia in 1872, carrying the coffee plants that would help make western El Salvador a leader in production by the early twentieth century, Julio, Emilio and Diego *lived* coffee. For Diego, his involvement was subtle; coffee earnings subsidized his lifestyle. He often took hostel guests on tours of local farms and mills but managed to remain aloof from the business aspects of coffee farming. Emilio had been thrown into the coffee world upon graduating from college. What began as a reluctant involvement, turned into an ambitious and passionate business venture. He admitted that he had never been interested in coffee until he lived in Seattle and found that a cup of coffee and a cigarette were the perfect
solution to the cold, rainy weather. Milo had taken the bold move of building a small mill on the farm property, hoping to insulate himself against another coffee crisis by being a grower, processor and exporter of coffee. He made his home in San Salvador and had an office there which he ran with his wife Cristina who had secretly confided in me that prior to marrying Milo she had only ever drank Nescafé. Julio, graduating with studies in agriculture, became a contract employee for the Consejo, hired by the NGO TechnoServe both for his expertise and for the respect he commanded. He worked in the quality control department and was next in line for a spot on the Salvadoran national cupping team.

Salvadoran elite are far from being a monolithic group. Jeffrey Paige points to two separate factions within the coffee elite that grew increasingly pronounced during the civil war of the 1980’s. He divided Salvadoran coffee growers into agro-industrialists and agrarians. These two groups responded to change and conflict in different ways, reflecting their varied economic, political and social interests (Paige 1997: 188). Agro-industrialists, Paige argues, were historically the millers and exporters of coffee whereas agrarians were the landed elite, growers whose power came in the form of social capital and who even now cling to the nineteenth century liberal ideology of “order and progress” (Paige 1997:199). The Álvarez family itself demonstrates the ideological power of the fragmented yet cohesive elite. Emilio’s U.S. education and his business interests cause him to sympathize with agro-industrialist interests even while his last

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8 On quality control trips, mills were compliant with Julio’s requests for random samples where they were not with other Consejo members who had grown up in San Salvador to non-producing families.
name pertains to the old guard of agrarians. Embracing “free trade” and the structural adjustments of neo-liberalism, Emilio believes that coffee and its industrial potential is what will set El Salvador free from its underdevelopment. Diego, having grown up on the family farm in a very different Santa Ana long before the city limits were marked by the gleaming lights of Pollo Campero and Pizza Hut, blames the “middlemen” particularly the Consejo and the government, both responsible for taxing and controlling exports, for a loss in profits and for the endemic problems of social inequality and suffering.

Diego fondly remembered when his family could spend summers in Europe and emphasized that the working conditions on the farms themselves had deteriorated. There had been a time, he said, when people working on the farms had had food to eat and were able to attend school with some regularity. Pointing to the war and to the United States as the causes of these changes, he solemnly told me: “The next war will be fought over hunger.” While Diego continues to enjoy financial security, the world of his imagining, one of respect and hierarchy, of prosperity, no longer exists. Life was somehow better then. Diego often remarked that poverty, while it has always existed, did not truly become a problem until recently.

Diego’s feeling of alienation within his own family was coupled by a strong distaste for anything from “Gringolandia,” made apparent in his nickname for me: “la irlandesa agringada” (the Americanized Irish girl). Critical of “El Bush” and U.S. involvement in the world, Diego was quick to joke. He once asked me why the United
States had never had a coup. “Because of its constitution?” I offered. “No,” he said. “Other countries have constitutions as well.” Searching his face, I tried to think. “Is it because the military isn’t as strong as it is in other countries?” “Maybe” he said, stretching the word into a long vowel sound. He smiled his impish smile and, taking a drag off of his cigarette he calmly replied “It’s because there’s no American Embassy in the United States.” He imagined the U.S. as a Mickey mouse-ified world with a McDonalds on every corner and joked that the “hamburger” was the official food. He saw U.S. modernity as hypocrisy, remarking that “human rights” and “fair trade” could not be sincerely exported from the same place where people paid four dollars for a latte. The U.S. was a cultural and political antagonist, one he partially blamed for the country’s problems.

This bitterness and vocal resistance to the cultural influences of the United States made him a natural critic of the Cup of Excellence, the brainchild of the U. S. based Alliance for Coffee Excellence and USAID and further heightened the differences between him and his nephews, both of whom had studied abroad (Julio in Honduras and Emilio in Seattle) and whose shirts bore U.S. brand logos while their iPods were filled with Sublime, Metallica and Green Day. Julio, in his job at the Consejo, worked on the Cup of Excellence, providing support during the event and tirelessly sorting samples during the sleepless weeks leading up to it. As a farmer, Emilio entered his coffee in the competition, hoping for a big win to boost prices for Topéca.
If Diego was resistant to the changes in his own family, it can be said that he was even more critical of those going on in his country especially in the coffee producing sector. In both 2006 and 2007, farmers from Chalatenango won the competition, displacing Santa Ana as the premier coffee producing region. Both years, the farmers were: "muy humilde," from nameless families and had won with lots supposedly taken from contested lands that were titled to them in the Reforma Agraria. Though I was unable to confirm whether the land of the winning farm had been titled during the agrarian reform both Julio and Diego were critical of the “land to the tiller” adage that marked Phase III of the 1980 land reform. The dearth of reliable data on land reform speaks to the idea that land reform even in El Salvador is not simply a question of titles but rather, a frictional narrative, one whose reality bears little resemblance to the ways in which it is perceived and spoken about.

The wins in Chalatenango made Diego slightly uncomfortable but it was the success of another well-known family that he found truly irksome. When Aida Battle, niece of Angel and prodigal daughter of another powerful coffee-producing family, won the Cup of Excellence in 2003, Diego was venomously critical, referring to her as “La Senorita Battle,” emphatically informing me that her farm had been nothing more than a bunch of weeds and that she, a city girl, had won the Cup of Excellence through sheer luck, not hard work. Julio too, commented on her win: “She won the first time and she got the opportunity to sell the coffee. She used it to market it and now people look for her.” Several years later, Aida’s micro-lot from Finca Mauritania is a top seller, bought by Raleigh-based Counter Culture Coffee. Utilizing the Cup of Excellence win, Aida has
transformed Finca Mauritania into an icon of specialty coffee; she embodies the changes that the conservative coffee sector is often unwilling or unready to deal with, demonstrating the internal tensions that are wrought by changing patterns of consumption in the U.S.

Working for the Consejo, Julio has become part of the organization that was founded upon the dissolution of INCAFE (Instituto Nacional del Café), the Salvadoran government’s solution to the coffee problem. INCAFE nationalized coffee export and was widely known for its corruption. Keeping prices fixed, many elites believe that it pocketed the fluctuating profits (Paige 1997:195-196). It left a legacy of distrust and was vehemently attacked by both factions of Salvadoran elite. Working for the Consejo makes Julio part of the very government that, while once the head of a true “coffee republic,” has sought refuge in the arms of neo-liberalism and President Bush; it is the only Central American country to currently have troops stationed in Iraq (Rubin 2004). Julio works in the industry because he sees coffee as being a crucial vehicle for social development; his paychecks come from TechoServe, an NGO that often collaborates with USAID to combat rural poverty. He also loves coffee; he regularly and eagerly attends cupping seminars, agricultural workshops and trade fairs in the hopes of expanding his knowledge. Julio is part of the new sector within the Consejo that is responsible for researching and stimulating internal consumption. He expressed the sentiment that he was reclaiming his family’s past: “I didn’t value what my family was doing. Right now I realize that they were doing things the right way.” In part because he speaks English and in part because of his affability, he is often responsible for taking potential foreign buyers
to farms and socializing with them. He attends all of the industry level conferences organized by the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA), trying to learn more about cupping, taste and quality.

In many ways the possibilities and limits of power are being transferred from one faction of the Salvadoran elite to another as “tradition” finds itself at odds with “business.” While the agrarians, the fourteen families, still occupy a place in the Salvadoran coffee world, they are powerful in name only and because they represent a history of traditional “artisanal” coffee production. They drive beaten-up Toyota pickups and their houses remain frozen in 1980’s decor. The agro-industrialists, with their “free market” ideologies are increasingly becoming the modern face of coffee production and Salvadoran business in general, effectively transforming the cultural, social and economic backgrounds in which most Salvadoran coffee growers find themselves. Specialty coffee thus presents an opportunity for agrarians and agro-industrialists alike in its ability to privilege both tradition and business as both a market and a movement.

The Farm: Land, Violence and History

The generational differences between Diego and his younger nephews were apparent. While Diego had grown up on the farm, the younger generation, born during the civil war, grew up visiting the farm. “The farm” has been used by Rice as a unit that is both material and symbolic. Looking at coffee farms of Northern Latin America he examines the role that coffee has had in shaping “place” and how, in this “place as process” the modern co-exists with the traditional in what has become a “coffee agro-
ecosystem” (Rice 1999:554). He argues that coffee landscapes are “always in a state of becoming” (Rice 1999:555). This, he believes, applies not only to the physical landscape of coffee trees and rainforest flora but to the historical and social dimensions of farming.

Many farmers spoke of the civil war as an era that changed their relationships to their farms, pointing to the violence and articulating a sense of cultural loss. One farmer, Joe Molina, talked about how his daughters had not been able to visit the farm as young children and so had never taken an active interest in agriculture. He told me that trying to teach them about the farm was like “cayendo en un saco roto” Joe was quick to complement the Álvarez’s, telling me how lucky I was to have found such kind friends in them. His aging guard dog by his side, Joe led me to the top of his farm, Bosque Lea, remarking as we ascended into the rainforest that he had not been able to come up that way even twenty years earlier. Emilio and Cristina’s farm, El Manzano, had been burned, the farm house still slightly charred around the edges. On a visit to Los Alpes, a winning Cup of Excellence farm in eastern El Salvador, Lichi Araujo, pointed out the bullet scuffs left from skirmishes that marked the rocks on the top of the hills. He showed me them firmly, directing my glance as a tour guide might point out a monument.

In these and other ways, the collective violence of the civil war was inscribed upon individual farms and played out on the land. Farms themselves became the target of vandalism, arson and worse as they were the literal and metaphorical loci of elite power. It was the ultimate invasion; having your farm burned. It not only signified the destruction of property and with it, prosperity, but the defacement of history, ancestry and
tradition. During this period, farmers who lived in the city of Santa Ana or in San Salvador became unable or unwilling to visit or live on their farms. The day to day management tasks were often delegated to trusted workers, colonos, who lived year round on the property. Farmers no longer knew their farms. The landscapes had changed as time elapsed and violence marked them.

In the case of the Álvarez family, the impact the war had on the daily rhythms of farming translated into a generational difference. It was a distinction that Diego was quick to make. Talking about growing up on El Manzano, Diego spoke about Emilio: “When you live on the farm you have to interact more with people...that’s very different from wearing a suit and a tie to the office.”

Most people I interviewed emphasized this connection to the land or the farm and by extension to the family that had traditionally occupied the land or farmhouse. Without this connection, without the knowledge of the dips and hills, the specific trees and rocks, a farmer was a mere manager and not a cafetalero. Not knowing one’s farm was the ultimate mark of a phony. Julio pointed to one of the winning farms with disdain: “They just earn the money and that’s it. She goes to the farm two times a year.” The only thing worse than an absentee farmer was a family who had recently started planting coffee. One of the farms Julio and I visited was owned by a couple from San Salvador who said that they had bought the farm to “be closer to nature.” Julio his colleague, Tomás, from the Consejo, both remarked upon the couple as we left the farm. Whispering on the way
back to the truck, they told me that it was suspicious to just “start farming” speculating that the couple had paid for the farm with drug money or worse.

Authority became fragmented as farmers grew separated from their land, losing the intimacy of their connection. As the civil war violently challenged class and social difference, it also wore away at the traditionally conservative coffee producing sector, dividing memories of time into pre and post-war, creating what Ellen Moodie would refer to as a “historical binary” (Moodie 2006). This division was not just remarked upon by coffee producers, but was often referred to by foreign buyers and has come to form a large part of the current marketing and promotional literature of Salvadoran coffee. There is the sense that El Salvador is in the midst of a renaissance, is struggling to “take back its share” in order to reestablish itself as a producer of quality coffee. A Cup of Excellence press release states: “El Salvador, once one of the top five powerhouses in coffee production, lost its share of the marketplace during the 1980’s internal war. With conflict well behind them, the coffee industry in El Salvador has supported the Cup of Excellence program as a means to provide them with the specialty focus needed to help reestablish its former prestige” (Spindler 2007).

Specialty coffee emerges as a recovery of things lost, a dramatic shift in the way business has normally been done. Time, particularly a pastoral vision of the past is, in part, what confers authenticity on Salvadoran coffee; Salvadorans have been artisanal coffee producers since time immemorial. Terrio shows how “time” is often problematic in the description of craft where craft identity is romanticized and positioned in

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9 In this case, I use farmer to refer to the owner of the land.
opposition to the alienation of capitalism. In doing this, Salvadoran farmers are deliberately denied the “same temporal existence” as modern workers because craft must remain anachronistic to be authentic (Terrio 2000:14).

As the past is recovered, the whole country is pitched as a winner. Susie Spindler reminded a crowd at the Cup of Excellence awards ceremony: “Everyone is a winner, the whole country, the farmers. And the consumers because we get great coffee to drink every morning.” This distinction between the war and the present mutes the structural violence of every day social suffering, masking the fact that while the modes of violence have changed, El Salvador is just as, if not more, violent as it was during the war years (Moodie 2006). This new world of post-war rebuilding is marked by a specific kind of nostalgia, one that pitches the idea of simple human relationships, occluding the larger structures of power and structural inequalities that mark the international commodities trade.

**Advertising and the Álvarez Family Story**

Like most genealogies, the Álvarez family story can only be pieced together. It is in this splicing process that my interest lies. By looking at the different ways in which los Álvarez publicly imagine themselves and are imagined, the process of identity creation comes into relief.

As the story goes, Emilio Álvarez Lalinde immigrated to El Salvador in 1872 followed by his brother, Rafael Álvarez Lalinde. Emilio, better known for his contributions to El Salvador’s health care system, financed Rafael’s foray into the coffee
business. Rafael is commonly held as the man responsible for the introduction of the de-
pulper, an industrial development which allowed for the wet processing of coffee beans,
an improvement that helped overall quality and eventually positioned the Álvarez
brothers as the premier coffee exporters of Central America (Lamperti 2006:24).
Raphael also introduced the use of izote, a plant that prevents erosion and has since
become the national flower of El Salvador.¹⁰ Together, Emilio and Rafael as Los
Hermanos Álvarez, were the owners of the biggest beneficio (mill) in Central America,
El Molino, a sprawling compound with now rusted, once majestic, gates that sits on the
outskirts of Santa Ana proper. The mill and the surrounding land have since been sold for
lotificacion, divided into housing lots that sprawl out from the city center.¹¹ The Álvarez
family continues to make its home in the city of Santa Ana and its involvement in coffee
continues in the form of smaller farms, mills and exporting businesses. Like the rusty
gates of El Molino, a traveler can tell that the buildings of Santa Ana must have looked
fresh at some point; the sidewalks once must not have crumbled into the gutters. It is a
layered decrepitude as the town is a strange palimpsest of 1988 Toyota pickup trucks and
faded newness. When, if ever, did this town look like it belonged in the year that it
existed? There is a sentiment of loss, of wear, of broken things, of a place stuck in time.

There is no doubt that the nineteenth century (1830-1930) was the coffee century
in Latin America (Roseberry 1995: 3). Roseberry argues that although the region entered

¹⁰ Izote is often used to prevent erosion on the steep mountainsides of the volcanic skirt. Acting as a wind
barrier, the plant demarcates farms, protecting the soil and the plants from wind. (Molina, Personal

¹¹ Land is increasingly being subdivided and sold. Lotificación refers to the division of land, previously
privately held for agricultural purposes, into lotes or lots.
into coffee production at roughly the same time and inserted itself into the same global context, production itself took different form across the hemisphere (Roseberry 1995: 6). In the case of El Salvador the nineteenth century was the peak of prosperity but ultimately, the prosperity and the inequalities upon which it was predicated were contributing factors to the civil war and continued social unrest. Mitchell Seligson shows that inequality in land distribution has historically been the cause of peasant uprising. In examining civil conflict, he looks at the history of land tenure and the agrarian structure of El Salvador. Seligson traces land use patterns from the colonial era; historical communal land holdings were banned in the 1880’s and replaced with the *colonato* (similar to an *encomienda*), a system of debt peonage that forced indigenous communities to work (Seligson 1995:55). These liberal reforms were meant to free up land for coffee production. *Colonos* were given usufruct rights over small plots but the system solidified class and racial hierarchies that persist to this day. As the *colonato* system was outlawed in 1980, renting supplanted the system.

1980 marks a crucial moment in land reform; El Salvador’s reforms were, by some, considered to be the most extensive in Latin America (Seligson 1995:64). There were three phases of reform based on the principle that “land must fulfill its social function and that ‘private agricultural land holdings are complying with their inherent social function whenever they are directly exploited by their owners.’” (Seligson 1995:57). While Phase I of the 1980 reform expropriated lands larger than 500 hectares, Phase II set about redistributing lands between 100-500 acres. Phase III (known infamously as the “land to the tiller” phase) banned renting and immediately declared
rented, sharecropped or leased lands eligible for expropriation; 52,000 former renters became property owners (Seligson 1995:57). Seligson argues that the “agrarian question,” while still important, is no longer as vital given the internal and external migration and the increased number of people living in urban area but stresses that the long term stability of the peace accords depends on ameliorating the underlying inequalities and tensions that stem from a historically exploitative and unjust system of land tenure (Seligson 1995:71).

In El Salvador, as of 2005, 78% of coffee farms were considered to be small or micro-producers of coffee, planting on lands between .02 and 10 manzanas (1.728 acres) (PROCAFE 2005). Santa Ana accounts for 37.23% of total Salvadoran coffee production while the entire western region of the country produces 70.68% of Salvadoran coffee (PROCAFE 2005). The winning farms from the Cup of Excellence reflect these statistics; the majority of the farms who submit samples are from western El Salvador and, in terms of size, range from just under 10 hectares to slightly over 50 (Alliance for Coffee Excellence 2007). In order to be eligible for the competition, a farm must be capable of offering a 15 bag lot, the bags each weighing 152lbs. These parameters mean that most participants are small and medium sized producers and the overwhelming majority makes their home in Santa Ana or following the Ruta de Flores, in Ahuachapan.

In recent years coffee has occupied a shifting place in Salvadoran culture, its dominance challenged by the re-distribution of its main currency: land. The violence of the 1980’s and the economic transformations that neo-liberalism has wrought also impact
the individuals and families who find themselves in an altogether different world from the one of their ancestors. How does an industry transition from doing business on the good faith of a nineteenth century handshake between gentlemen to operating in a jungle of online auctions, websites and international certifying bodies? How do people like the Álvarez family, coffee elites in an increasingly meritocratic and neo-liberal industry, navigate the jungles of marketing and quality standards and retain their relevance? If we are living in what Appadurai might refer to as a “determinitorialized” world, how does the media change the possibilities for their “imagined selves and imagined worlds”? (Appadurai 1996: 3,4). For the Álvarez family, it is a struggle between the past and the present in which the past is strategically employed and reflected on.

Advertising becomes a way of charting these seas, of entering a new marketplace in an electronic age of “imagined selves and imagined worlds.” But how does advertising do its work and where does it come from? Daniel Miller complicates our notion of the relationship between society and the media showing us that the one is not merely a mirror of the other. He examines the semiotic relationship at the root of advertising, showing how marketing is most successful when it brings about an unhinging of “signs” from their “significance” (Miller 1994:192). In short, it is a realism “...constituted by the long-term role of advertising in constructing a genre within which commodities are supposed to be part of a kind of hyper-real idealized world of consumption” (Miller 1994:191). Specialty coffee has constructed and works to construct this genre, a “hyper-real” arena in which consumption is idealized and sterilized narratives loom, edging out the less pleasant, less friendly visions of what the effects are
of consuming a particular commodity. Terrio shows the ways in which photos and stories are strategic mechanisms that “elide the tensions associated with the everyday operation and intergenerational transfer of confectionary houses” (Terrio 2000:102). This is similar to the ways in which the Álvarez family history does not point to the conflicts and fissures within the family. Terrio also conceptualizes the confectionary house as a “corporate family unit” that held “…commercial property (ideally) in perpetuity rather than a kinship unit based on lines of descent” (2000:103). The Álvarez family is related by blood and by coffee. As a corporate and kinship unit, it is into this world of idealized consumption that the Álvarez family inserts its narratives.

A Salvadoran producer conscious of the potential of niche markets, Emilio Lopez represents the sort of change that Counter Culture’s Aida Battle embodies; he became a consumer of coffee while in college in Seattle. Returning to the country, he admits that he “saw everything in terms of numbers.” He created a digitalized payroll system on his farm, requiring all his workers to obtain national ID cards, in some cases the only formal documents they had ever possessed. Wearing his genealogy on his sleeve, Emilio’s website for Topéca coffee contains this “History:”

In 1870, an accomplished physician named Emilio Álvarez left the comfort and stability of his home country in Columbia in search of wealth and happiness in the wild frontier of El Salvador. With his family, he brought precious cargo including a caféto. Not just a coffee tree but a strain of the original Arabica coffee bean called “Typica” that we now call Bourbon Café. Milo had no idea that within two generations, his family would become one of the most influential families in coffee. By the 1920’s, the family plantation went as far as the eye could see for anyone living in Santa Ana (Topéca Coffee 2008).
Emilio’s conversion to a coffee consumer in the United States gives him the ability to straddle two worlds. Speaking flawless English and having studied business has given him the opportunity to better present his farm to foreign buyers:

It’s not how I want it to be, it’s more how the consumers want to hear. I can have the best coffee in the world but if I don’t know how to sell it, they’re not going to buy it even though I believe in my coffee, even though I know it’s the best. But if I don’t show it to people as they want to see it, I’m going to have a hard time selling it.

For Emilio, the farm history creates nothing but simply refracts the Álvarez reality through a literary device that relays back to consumers what Emilio thinks they might want to hear. It acts not only as a mini-history of the origins of Salvadoran coffee but also as introduction to an epic, a heroic cycle that recounts centuries of artisanal coffee production. Emilio’s introduction is not so different from that of El Borbollon, the Álvarez family’s coffee mill. El Borbollon also invokes national and local history and the strength of a family that can almost be seen as a metonymy for Salvadoran coffee itself. While U.S. consumers cannot appreciate the full weight of the Álvarez name, they can abstractly appreciate concepts that suggest the continuity of tradition and the mastery of specialized knowledge. The Álvarez family emerges as a name that can be trusted, an authority in that world. El Borbollon’s publicity release re-creates the myth of the Álvarez:

It was over one hundred years ago that the Álvarez family arrived in El Salvador and was captivated by the country’s [sic] beauty, mild climate and rich soil. With coffee seeds they brought from their native Colombia they started planting coffee on the slopes of the Santa Ana volcano. Today, the fourth generation continues growing and processing coffee with the same careful ways of their ancestors producing rich, full bodied, aromatic coffee year after year (El Borbollon 2008).
Finca Malacara’s narrative differs. Echoing the familiar tale of the Álvarez family and its immigration from Colombia, Finca Malacara pays heed to the idea of “social conscience,” emphasizing the manner in which they believe los Álvarez have always done business.

When Don Rafael Álvarez Lalinde began the coffee business in El Salvador, he got advised from coffee farmers in Colombia, history tells that one of these friends told him two facts to be successful in the coffee business: To keep a coffee nursery to always have new plants in the farm. And the other, “To be hard with the Indians”. He followed the first advised and never the second one. Good treatment of the employees has been an important factor of the business ethics for the Álvarez family, in every coffee plantation owned by the Álvarez family existed a school, a clinic and a sports facility for the free used of the employees (Finca Malacara 2008).

Finca Malacara’s story communicates not only the idea that the Álvarez family should be seen again, as a metonymy for coffee, but that in addition to the legacy of traditional processing and farming methods, the Álvarez family’s altruism is itself a fact that time and history has reaffirmed. Finca Malacara’s story is less fluent in its style, written in rough, errored English and including anecdotes that may offend potential consumers. A U.S. consumer cannot walk Santa Ana and see the hospitals, and buildings, the once glorious streets named after the Álvarez patriarchs. The farm history attempts to transport a consumer to a world in which this surname not only matters, but signifies something. This world is a not quite past and a not quite present, or, as Appadurai would have us think, perhaps the world in which los Álvarez and their eager customers dwell is a “…synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal central casting, to which recourse can be taken as appropriate” (Appadurai 1996: 30). It is tempting to find
refuge in that in-between world where time and space have been expanded to both drive us apart and together (Fabian 1983 and Appadurai 1996).

**Conclusion:**

In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai reminds us that the imagination is “…is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (Appadurai 1996:4). It would be unfair to say that the identities of coffee producers in El Salvador are simple constructions born out of their commercial relationship to the United States. These consumable identities do however meld private reflexivity with public displays of authenticity and operate in reference to an audience of consumers who increasingly demand to know who is behind their daily cup. These stories exist in a globalized world well acquainted with the predictable conflicts, the stereotyping of characters and the pseudo-realism of modern mass media as forces that make the world itself easier to consume (Adorno 2001: 161). The relative predictability of modern narratives (as in the story of Topéca coffee or in the case of any of the twenty-three farm histories) allows us to identify with these realistic dramas and understand how things fit into a neatly delimited world. The Álvarez family has been successful at capturing a specific past for use in their specific vision of the present where time is suspended, and we as consumers are imbued with a sense of “nostalgia for the present” (Appadurai 1996: 30). In the case of chocolate production in France, chocolatiers attempted to authenticate their goods and modes of production to combat cultural homogenization and the threats of greater economic integration (Terrio 2000:16) They did this in three ways: the
establishment of guilds (trade organizations), the creation and dissemination of different taste protocols and the “turn to the past as a means of grounding their claims of cultural authenticity” (Terrio 2000: 16). Coffee culture in El Salvador is different. Because coffee has been a constitutive element of culture in the country, coffee farmers are not stuck with the hard work of trying to make El Salvador and coffee synonymous.

As Benson and Fischer would remind us, globalization itself is not a simple process of cultural imperialism followed by either resistance or acceptance. It is a complex process in which “Hegemonic aspirations run together with resistant attitudes and practices that, from another perspective, are linked up with other kinds of hegemonic aspirations” (Benson and Fischer 2006: 17). The members of the Álvarez family do not simply imagine themselves as they do because they are told to do so. Or, as Roseberry would have it, the relationship between “America” and the “Americas” is not a simple relationship between a “donor” society and a meek “receptor” (Roseberry 1995: 86). Santa Ana is itself an example of an ambivalent experience with globalization; the Metrocentro with its paved parking lot stands next to the corner where a woman behind a wood burning stove heats water to make a “traditional” cup of Nescafé.
CHAPTER III: EXCELLENCE IN A CUP

Entering the cupping room is a shock to the system. The aroma of coffee hangs almost suffocatingly in the air and each cupper slurps the coffee in rhythmic gurgles, allowing for the flavor of the bean mixed with oxygen to develop fully in the palate. Armed with clipboards and scoring sheets, the slurping and wafting is punctuated by careful note taking: a hint of cinnamon, good acidity, citric tones. The judges turn in their sheets, some nervous, others confident in their ability to distinguish a good cup. Between cupping sessions I run into Sarah, a cupper from Chicago-based Intelligentsia Coffee. Near tears, she looks at me: “I’m off calibration today. I just feel bad, you know? When I’m cupping the coffee, I have someone’s livelihood in my hands.” These are the people who will decide which lot is the country’s best. In the balance of subjective taste and numeric scores lies the winner for the Cup of Excellence, an annual competition that highlights the highest quality coffees of El Salvador.

A Cultural Language of Development

The January 2006 USAID “Marketing Communications and Channel Activity Plan for Café de El Salvador” attempts to gain a clear understanding of constraints and opportunities facing Salvadoran coffee farmers. Meant to provide information about exportability to industry level decision makers, the dry document develops a strategic marketing plan to help farmers expand into the specialty coffee market. The information for the report was gathered through surveys that gauged how people perceived Salvadoran coffee in the U S. In some ways it is an ethnographic document marked by its
instrumentalism; the cultural realities that it depicts are captured in order to help El Salvador capitalize on the cultural idiosyncrasies that foreign markets, particularly the United States, might find attractive. It is a plan in search of authenticity. The marketing goals, comprised of what AID refers to as Key Marketing Messages, are broken into several sound bites:

- El Salvador has a unique status as a keeper and defender of heirloom and boutique varieties of coffee;
- El Salvador has artisan coffees, handcrafted by small farmers using traditional processing and shade canopy;
- El Salvador has re-emerged as a top quality coffee origin with differentiated offerings;
- The whole coffee sector is dedicated to research, the environment, and sustainable certifications.
- El Salvador’s coffee industry can be trusted to support the needs of the coffee trade.
- El Salvador is a great place to visit, meet people, and learn.

These marketing messages are intended to target what AID refers to as “influencers;” El Salvador is instructed to renew its presence at the trade level both nationally and internationally specifically by utilizing the press, internet, auctions and trade shows. The elusive “influencers” are trend-setters, the informal cultural and taste making authorities within specialty coffee. They include not only buyers, but independent coffee shop baristi; hip people who comprise the vanguard of coffee consuming cultures. The document warns that these “influencers” do not appreciate “hard sell” tactics; they buy goods based on personal experience, logic and emotion.
As an agricultural product, coffee becomes enmeshed in the language of foreign aid, of bootstraps and band-aids, industrialization, technification and modernization (Birdsall and Szekely 2003). These are the institutionalized elements of a U.S./Latin America dialogue that has spanned from the Monroe Doctrine to the Alliance for Progress to the neoliberal experiment of Williamson’s 1990 “Washington Consensus.”

Most recently, USAID’s coffee marketing plan for El Salvador formed part of a regional initiative meant to assist Central American coffee producers in regaining market access. Marrying economics and culture, the plan indicates a (re)newed institutional awareness of the commercial potential at the heart of the reflexive identities formed across producing and consuming countries. It also provides us a glimpse into the ways in which Salvadoran coffee society is becoming involved in a process of imagining change as it embraces new marketing opportunities. Arjun Appadurai reminds us that this imagination “…is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (Appadurai 1996:4). This advertising and imagining finds its space in the gritty contact area of global connection.

This chapter will look at how the marketing messages of the 2006 USAID advertising initiative both inform and are reflected in the promotional activities of the Consejo Salvadoreño del Café. The messages are also highlighted in the Cup of Excellence, an international coffee competition. I will examine how two groups of people, employees of the Consejo Salvadoreño del Café and members of the international jury for the Cup of Excellence interact on both a face to face and imaginary level through
the practice of “cupping” and what their interactions can tell us about the resistance, 
acceptance and reflexivity of the relationships at the core of specialty coffee.

**El Salvador: “Un Gobierno con Sentido Humano”**

The official slogan of the Salvadoran Tourist Board: “Do you believe in love at first 
sight? El Salvador: [it] will conquer you!” Aside from the loaded colonial implications of 
the phrase “it will conquer you,” (literally “te conquistará”) the tourist literature constructs 
a narrative of a country at peace, rich in natural beauty. Absent from this national tapestry 
is mention of the continued escalation of violent crimes, the wounds still fresh from the 
civil war and the politically polarized society divided along class lines. If we take our 
reality from USAID, El Salvador is a virtual neoliberal classroom, “…a great place to 
visit, meet people, and learn” (USAID 2006). A newer, sexier El Salvador is for sale 
where even the government has a slogan: “Un Gobierno con Sentido Humano.” A 
government with human sense.

While publicly envisioning El Salvador is largely the charge of the Salvadoran 
Tourist Board, the Consejo Salvadoreño del Café works in conjunction with the board 
promoting coffee abroad; its slogan:“Café de El Salvador: Drink it and Smile.” The logo 
is an anthropomorphized coffee cup, which smiles and winks (its eye, a coffee bean) as 
the mountains of El Salvador form part of its silhouette. This logo literally conjoins the 
geography of El Salvador with its leading export, demonstrating the importance of coffee 
as a mode by which El Salvador tries to lay claim to international investment, tourism 
and development and as a way that El Salvador chooses to talk about itself.
Food is often used as a metaphor for self and other. In *Cuban Counterpoint* Fernando Ortiz (1995) shows how commodities can become metaphors for national identity. Exploring “cubanidad,” Ortiz looks to tobacco and sugar as two commodities whose oppositional traits personified Cuban ambivalence about racial mixing and modernity. In her work on French chocolate, Susan Terrio also shows how important food is in identity construction, particularly in constructing an identity in reference to an “other.” Terrio calls this “dialectic differentiation” where food is a metaphor for the self and a stereotype of the other. In her work, chocolate becomes a way of understanding contemporary visions of a French self where consumption is linked to primitive visions of the “other” and essentialist visions of both self and other (Terrio 2000:239). Increased knowledge of the producing other or the consuming self is, of course, partial, as Terrio reminds us: “The constitutive paradox of exoticism is that the appeal of others as exotics is based on an ignorance of them as peoples” (Terrio 2000:240).

In this advertised world, coffee becomes a lens through which El Salvador is viewed and understood. These images of El Salvador insert themselves into a global context that often imagines El Salvador and, Latin America in general, as pertaining to a “third world,” speaking about and to it in the technocratic neoliberal language of “underdevelopment” and “democratization,” as the region is obliquely positioned in opposition to U.S. pre-eminence and culture. El Salvador particularly exists in the popular imagination as a war-torn reality both in the Salvadoran imaginary and in the ways in which the international community chooses to talk about El Salvador. The danger of course, is that El Salvador and the United States are reductively seen as a
“...homogeneous mass of poor, Third World humanity, cut more or less from the same cloth on the one hand, and an aggregation of struggling Western individuals, each unique, each working to fulfill his or her potential on the other” (Binford 1996 in Moodie 2006: 69). This juxtaposition, “Third World humanity” versus “struggling Western individuals” is another binary that finds space within the marketed world of specialty coffee. This binary in part propels the mission of the Cup of Excellence.

The Cup of Excellence

“My objective is to differentiate coffee” Susie Spindler said in an interview with The Economist. Spindler, the executive director of the Alliance for Coffee Excellence, is a slight, middle-aged woman with red ringlets that surround her round, almost constantly smiling face. Together with coffee guru George Howell, Spindler founded the Alliance for Coffee Excellence, the non-profit organization that manages the Cup of Excellence. Simply put, the Cup of Excellence is an annual competition that takes place in eight coffee producing countries.\(^\text{12}\) The Cup of Excellence is an ethnographic scenario that shows how taste and place virtually collide as standards of taste, concepts of place and a hierarchy of “tastemakers” fight for commercial and professional gain.\(^\text{13}\)

The Cup of Excellence is locally sponsored by the Consejo Salvadoreño del Café the state agency that was founded in 1989 by Legislative Decree 353 to replace INCAFE (Instituto Nacional del Café). It has relative autonomy, loosely pertaining to the

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\(^{12}\) Colombia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Bolivia, El Salvador, Brazil and Honduras.

\(^{13}\) In her work on chocolate, Terrio (2000) has demonstrated the ethnographic importance of trade fairs and guild meetings.
government while also receiving money from the private sector. In addition to serving an educational purpose by offering seminars and establishing a coffee school (Escuela del Café) the Consejo is the body that directly interfaces with international buyers; its mandate is largely dictated by the market and by the Specialty Coffee Association of America. It is part of what makes El Salvador the ideal Central American coffee republic; the Consejo creates a certification friendly coffee culture where the buyer always comes first. The premium placed on “quality” has introduced new responsibilities to the Consejo which is ultimately accountable for all of the coffee that leaves the country. Random samples must be taken from each mill before export so that buyers can be assured that the coffee lot they purchased is the one they will receive. The Consejo is also acutely aware of the fact that in order to be able to market their product outside of El Salvador, farmers need to know how their coffee tastes, not just to them, but to potential buyers. Consejo employees become interlocutors of taste, cultural ambassadors and enforcers of contracts.

Beginning in 2003, Cup of Excellence, El Salvador, was first and foremost cooperation between the Consejo and the Alliance for Coffee Excellence. In addition, USAID, PROCAFE (a Salvadoran coffee research organization), the Salvadoran Ministry of Agriculture (Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería) and several other NGO’s have been involved in supporting the event through monetary donations and donations in kind.\footnote{Procter and Gamble also contributed money to the event.} Susie Spindler coordinates the jury selection from her office in Missoula, Montana and the Consejo reserves conference rooms and accommodations, arranges for...
visits to farms and tourist excursions and pays for additional security personnel. The international judges are shepherded around the country in microbuses, travelling with “tourist police” who are armed with guns. Though the Consejo and Alliance for Coffee Excellence interact during the year, it is the weeklong event that truly demonstrates the mettle of the relationship between the two organizations.

The Consejo staff that works at the event wears matching polo shirts and, as hosts, they become de facto tour guides, shepherding the judges to social events, escorting them on tours and answering their questions. The permanent Consejo staff is bilingual, largely university educated and dramatically different from the event staff hired on a per-diem basis that prepare the samples for cupping and whisk away the refuse from the cupping room. The polo-clad Consejo staff must maintain their neutrality and, while welcoming the judges, must also navigate the sensitive Salvadoran coffee culture that spends the week nervously anticipating the results of the competition. They tally the results, computing them in a small room in the hotel and keeping the anonymous samples in line with their numbers. The Consejo shuts down for the week of the event to redirect itself to provide support and keep things running smoothly. Julio remarked that as the final cupping rounds grew nearer, he received numerous phone calls from old family friends who were “just checking in.” The conversations would inevitably wend toward a casual question dropped regarding the results, who the judges were and how the cupping rounds were progressing. Julio had perfected the diplomatic courtesy that his name and professional position required.
Gathering cuppers and Consejo employees together, the organization in charge (perhaps in name only), the Alliance for Coffee Excellence, stresses the importance of local cooperation and education, all bound together under the banner of quality, or excellence. According to executive director, Susie Spindler, the Cup of Excellence “...opens the door to discovery, excitement and appreciation” of coffee. It is a slow dance of diplomacy as El Salvador greets these coffee professionals and, while making them feel at home, exposes them to their culture through a lexicon of cultural difference.

The international jury phase comes at the end of a long process during which coffees have been cupped by regional and national juries passing through different rounds of elimination. The international jury phase requires the cooperation of local government agencies which act as a point of contact, organizing and providing support to the foreign visitors in their week long stay. Within the specialty coffee industry the Cup of Excellence is known as one of the most stringent coffee competitions that has ever existed. Winners are permitted to display the Cup of Excellence seal on their coffee labels. The event is a unique cooperation between specialty coffee buyers, international aid organizations and local governments and confounds the overdrawn opposition within coffee that exists between the extremes of “movement” and “market.”

During the competition, international judges follow a strict schedule: a 7:30am wake-up call is followed by a bland breakfast (so as not to influence the palate). Some days, they will drink regular commercial grade- coffee as if it were water, to neutralize the taste in their mouths. The morning is spent in two cupping sessions and the
afternoons are spent on tours to mills, farms and tourist locations during which the judges are accompanied by armed guards and always greeted with refreshments. The week culminates in a final dinner at which the judges receive awards for their participation and the decisions of the winning coffees are announced. Before the official ceremony, there is a “meet and greet,” where the judges talk face to face with the farmers whose coffee they had cupped. It is a flurry of business cards, handshakes and picture-taking.

On the final night of the 2007 Cup of Excellence, Susie Spindler addressed the judges and farmers present: “These are the missionaries of coffee...they will go back and tell about how wonderful your coffee is.” The judges had been hand-picked by Spindler based on their previous participation in events of the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA). Many had grown up in the industry, starting as career baristi and eventually working for small coffee roasters or buyers. Each had extensive experience in cupping, preparing and selling coffee. Their position as judges in the Cup of Excellence was viewed as being both a business opportunity and an altruistic gesture; many had donated their time to the event and saw themselves as the “ambassadors” or “missionaries” of coffee.

Most of the international judges did not speak Spanish, making communication difficult, awkward at best. A usually calm Julio angrily commented on this as he rushed off to translate, “You would think they would try a little bit. It’s a question of respect. They are making money off of this.” On a whole, most of the judges were younger than the farmers and while they were knowledgeable about preparing and evaluating coffee,
having been chosen for their reputations as tastemakers, they remained ignorant to the sensitive class, race and gender distinctions that delimit the Salvadoran coffee world. The cultural currency of respect was blurred; the tightly knit Salvadoran coffee elite braced itself and, in the presence of these peculiar judging “others,” pulled off the veneer of solidarity. One U.S. judge commented in a conversation after the awards ceremony: “One of the things that’s so fascinating about coffee really is that it transcends. It transcends age, race, religion, political affiliations, socio-economic stature. Really, all of those things, throughout the entire world, people can come together over a cup of coffee. It’s absolutely true.”

In her work with chocolatiers in France, Susan Terrio argues that makers of fine chocolate form “…a community of permeable, shifting boundaries constituted in numerous places over time” (Terrio 2000: 20). Like chocolate, the coffee community can be considered a community that, not necessarily bounded by time or space, finds itself at both the local and global level, as identities emerge, linked to the consumption, production and winding paths that coffee takes from “seed to cup.” Like any community or culture, it is shot through with power asymmetries as people participate in it unevenly. Fischer shows that economic and cultural participation in the commodity chain requires that “…the material dimension of ‘economic well-being’ must be understood within the broader dimension of social experience and existential well-being and cannot be reduced to ‘need’ or ‘interest’” (Fischer 2006: 6). This is not to say that U.S. and European coffee professionals participate in the coffee industry solely according to “interest” while coffee farmers are simply compelled by “need.” Both groups literally make their living off of
coffee though this, of course, means something quite different in El Salvador than it does in Washington DC.

On one afternoon trip to a local coffee mill, Beneficio Las Tres Puertas, judges were led in to look at the inspection line; women were sifting through the green beans as a conveyor belt timed out thirty second intervals. It is nearly impossible for untrained eyes and inexperienced hands to sort through the beans quickly enough to keep time with the conveyor belt. One of the judges, a woman from Chicago, sat down beside a woman and tried her hand at finding defects. After she finished, as if stepping out of an improv theater scene, the foreman turned to her and, pulling out a crisp twenty-dollar bill, he joked in broken English “Now I pay you.” The women working glanced up, their hands still moving, methodically; the money hung in the air. The judges exited into the next room where refreshments were laid out on a table with silver-plated trays and linen napkins.

**Cupping As An Art**

And people without memories are rudderless, unconnected to their own histories and culture, mimics who have placed their knowledge of self and other in a “psychic tomb” in the mistaken belief that if they master their colonizer’s language they will own it and be allowed to sit as equals at the dinner table and use it as a fork, however clumsily. It is not easy to eat crumbs with a foreign fork. Such a people, because of their alienation, will become dangerous to themselves and to others. Like hooligan parrots.

Breyton Breytonbach “Imagining Africa”

Taste-testing or, in coffee-speak, “cupping,” has become part of the web of consciousness that links and divides producers and consumers. Cupping is based on an
awareness of taste in part derived from an awareness of demand; it is an inter-subjective experience. An art codified in a scientific language, cupping is subjective, objective and highly imaginative.

I had heard of cupping before my first visit to El Salvador. Baristi at Murky Coffee had just started to “cup coffee” in 2005 when I became a shop regular. Nick Cho had renovated a room previously filled with couches and tables for lounging into a laboratory, what he called a “cupping room.” Skeptical baristi and coffee shop regulars saw this as a minor inconvenience, a decision that cut down on “chilling out” space. Soon, small groups of baristi and a few chosen patrons were allowed into the inner sanctum, by private invitation, as if it were a speakeasy. The room, previously part of the rest of the coffee shop, became a private space and though there was no door to prohibit entry, its espresso machine, grinders, beakers, spoons and kettles rendered the 10x8 room off-limits. During any given session, five to ten people would stand shoulder to shoulder in the room, now painted neon green and, looking at the Specialty Coffee Association of America flavor wheel, would qualify their comments with the official vocabulary. As I sipped my soy lattes, I dismissed the cuppers as fanatics, practitioners of a strange ritual. So it was that I discovered cupping in Virginia. It was in El Salvador that I learned to cup.

An historical examination of the origins of cupping in El Salvador reveals that it is, at least in part, an imported practice. Though I asked all of the Salvadorans with whom I interacted exactly when people began to cup coffee, I did not encounter a
consistent answer. Some maintained that it was a relatively new practice while others told me that it was a “traditional” one that predated SCAA standards of taste. Because of the lack of a coffee consuming culture in El Salvador, it was not difficult to imagine generations of cafétaleros exporting something they themselves did not drink. It was also conceivable that a handful of dedicated farmers, in an effort to export only the finest product, had been cupping coffee for years before the English word “cupping” existed. Initially, these inconsistencies confused me but, as Terrio shows, unpacking “tradition” does not necessarily mean we are distinguishing between a “true” and an “untrue” past (Terrio 2000:17).

Some of my bigger questions regarding cupping were answered one morning at the Consejo. Nestor, a quality control employee, sheepishly presented four handwritten pages on the back of scrap paper. I was introduced to his story of cupping. Nestor told me about Joe (Jhoe) Hilton Brown, the man who established the distinct qualities (calidades) of coffee in El Salvador; coffee is divided by altitude and along the lines of its own natural organic categories. In El Salvador, export-grade coffee is considered to be Central Standard, High Grown or Strictly High Grown.15 The brashness of English interrupted the flow of Nestor’s story; he spelled Joe “Jhoe” and attempted to transliterate the foreign named coffee classifications. Central Standard became “escentral estandar.” Nestor’s mythological Joe Hilton Brown eventually created a school in which he trained Salvadorans in the art of cupping. Many of the current members of the Consejo’s quality

15 It is also divided according to quality: gourmet, commercial grade etc.
control department would graduate from this school of taste. Salvadorans were borrowing names from English for a product not produced in the English speaking world and were re-learning how to taste through American taste-buds.

Through this learning experience El Salvador was regaining its place as a producer of quality coffee. USAID applauded El Salvador on its progress; a press release, part of the agency’s “Success Story” series, entitled “Star Cuppers Smell Success” included a photo of Salvadoran cuppers posing thoughtfully next to a table of coffee samples. If the article congratulated El Salvador on its success, it also made ample mention of USAID’s role in the country’s renaissance. The Salvadorans pictured were part of a regional development program that had chosen the top ten cuppers from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador based on a series of exams given to measure aptitude. Finalists gained entry to specialized training modules and, after a year of classes and assessments, were awarded diplomas endorsed by the Specialty Coffee Association of America. They were officially masters at cupping.

In a conversation about USAID’s regional program, Nestor put it bluntly: “No sabíamos lo que teníamos.” We did not know what we had. In keeping with the generally acknowledged taste protocols, the Consejo established a coffee school for small producers, coffee buyers and farm workers in 2007. Reshaped in the Salvadoran context,

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16 Foreign, particularly English, German or American surnames are not uncommon in the Salvadoran coffee world. The “Hill” family, one of the most famous, traces its roots to the United States. I was unable to find information on Joe Hilton Brown and the time constraints of my research prohibited me from talking at length about him with other members of the cupping team.
many of the course materials came directly from SCAA and had been electronically cut and pasted into a series of hour long power point presentations.

According to the Escuela de Café’s introductory slide “…the goal of cupping is to be able to produce and sell, in various market niches, a high quality product. To achieve those ends a certain standard must exist so that expert cuppers and producers can communicate their preferences to one other.” This was in keeping with the larger institutional goals of the Consejo as its stated purpose is to ensure that contracts are complied with and that coffee ready for export is of the quality and amount agreed to. Cuppers were meant to be the Consejo’s foot soldiers, interlocutors of taste in communication with distant, consuming “others.” The Consejo was responsible for conveying preference and ensuring that all parties involved were talking about the same thing.

Before the first day of class, Nestor pulled me aside. Pushing his thick glasses up on his face, he placed on arm on my shoulder, as if he were an Olympic coach caught mid pep-talk. “Didi, cupping requires great restraint and practice.” I was already nervous, obviously out of place and feeling out of my element. I remembered a conversation I had with Cristina and Emilio a year earlier at El Manzano, the main farm of Emilio’s Topéca brand. Cristina and Milo had told me about people who paid to take cupping classes in San Salvador. Wide eyed, Cristina gushed: “They put one drop, only one drop of a flavor in a cup of water and you have to know how to distinguish that flavor. It is super difficult.” We were sitting around the house at El Manzano listening to the Grateful
Dead as the afternoon rain punctuated the conversation. My mind wandered as I had difficulty imagining how anyone could have that fine a sense of taste. It seemed like tasting essence of tangerine in a 12oz cup of water would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

A year later I found myself standing around a table at the Consejo, part of the inaugural class of the Escuela del Café (slogan: Viva la nueva cultura del café!). The Consejo’s quality control department was sparsely decorated to say the least. Next to a roaster, there was a small scale, several trays for measuring beans, numerous unlabeled samples that had become estranged from their tags and one computer with dial-up internet. The shelves that flanked the roaster were filled with outdated agricultural catalogues and wooden cases containing cupping kits. On the wall hung two posters: the Specialty Coffee Association of America taste wheel and a diagram of the various coffee bean defects. To say that the room smelled like coffee was a gross understatement. The coffee smell was intensified by the cloying odor of the yute sacks in which the coffee had been stored, smelling lightly of turpentine. The room was dusted in a fine layer of the coffee parchment that blew out of the roaster as the coffee beans popped to signify they were ready. It was in this room that we learned to taste. Nestor poured four cups of water in front of each person. Only it wasn’t water. One was salty, one basic, one acid and one sweet. We were charged with the task of ranking them. Sensing our apprehension, he spoke softly, “Coffee is a series of lessons that one never stops learning.”
One Cup, Two Worlds:

I first met Julio Pacas in a narrow hotel hallway. Searching for my contact at the Consejo, Julio introduced himself to me and asked if I needed help. He led me to a patio outside the official cupping room. Dressed in a white polo shirt with the slogan of the Consejo (Café de El Salvador: Drink it and Smile) emblazoned on the front, worn Lee jeans and boots, he introduced me to the people who would become my guides in the Salvadoran coffee world. The five similarly clad men looked askance at me, wondering if I was a journalist. Was I a cupper? A barista? A buyer?

The quality control department was in charge of maintaining, grinding and numbering the samples for the Cup of Excellence and had congregated outside of the silent cupping room on the patio. Gas burners to boil water, an industrial grade grinder and plastic bags of green and roasted beans were perched on several folding tables. Balmore, head roaster, had freshly roasted the day’s beans at the Consejo building in the center of San Salvador and had brought the samples across town to the Marriott Gran Via in his 1988 Ford pick-up. As the international jury slurped the different brews, the Salvadoran quality control and cupping team set up a parallel cupping station outside. “We like to keep it as similar as possible, you know, to test our skills,” Julio said as Nestor nodded in agreement. Julio handed me a spoon and told me to dip it in the steamy brew and slurp. I tensed.

“What do you taste?” he asked me. “Is it bitter?” Reluctant to respond, I searched for cues. As he awaited my reaction to the coffee, one of the head judge barged outside
and stridently interrupted the calm of the patio. “These women need to learn how to pour into the samples.” As he skulked back inside, I looked quizzically at Julio. “A lot of the staff are the family members of cafetaleros. They pour the hot water into the samples so that the judges can cup them.” Consejo staff, signified by their white or blue polo shirts, was distinct from the temporary staff that was responsible for pouring, measuring and cleaning up after the cupping session. Together, the temporary staff and the Consejo employees were separated from the judges who wore black aprons with the insignia of the event and had nametags attached to their chests, their clipboards with the cupping sheets were also an extension of their outfit, a permanent fixture to which they clung tightly.

After each cupping session, Susie led a discussion in which the tallied scores from the individual cuppers were compiled along with a list of the different adjectives inspired by each anonymous sample. Sitting in a circle, the judges voted, reading their numbers, scores on a scale of 1-100 out loud. This public vote was observed with anticipation by members of the Salvadoran cupping team and quality control department. They had tasted the coffee as well and, as observers, could silently test their skills, seeing if they had graded the coffees similarly to the international jury.

While in El Salvador in addition to living with and learning from the Álvarez family, I was also part of a team that visited the winning farms of the Cup of Excellence gathering the data that would allow potential buyers to learn more about the farms before participating in the online coffee auction. This process took place in the anticlimactic
week following the Cup of Excellence. As the international judges returned home, the Consejo began the logistical nightmare of supervising the auction and export of the winning lots. The Consejo was responsible for coordinating the farm visits and for ultimately writing the farm histories that were passed along to the Alliance for Coffee Excellence to supplement the scores of the winning lots with the stories of the people who had produced them.

The farm “histories,” while unique, were formulaic. The product of a brief interview supplemented by geographical and agricultural data, they highlight family history, tracing the ownership and management of the farm to the last century. I accompanied Julio as he interviewed over ten farms of the winning group of twenty-three, traveling from Santa Ana in the west to Chalatenango in the east. While the individual visits differed, the form given to the interviewer by the Consejo ensured some level of standardization. In particular, the Consejo was interested in knowing exactly where the winning lot had been harvested from on the farm to be able to pass this information along to buyers. The details of the micro-lot are embedded in the narratives of ownership, genealogy and future goals. The farm histories were written with a specific audience in mind; they pay close attention to agricultural and ecological minutia that would escape a casual coffee drinker. Including themes of interest to most U.S. consumers and buyers, they inquire as to the business practices and social elements of coffee farming by asking how many families work on each farm, where they live and what sort of benefits are provided. Each story is hopeful and, vying for a high bid, the farmers nervously anticipate what a higher selling price might mean for their businesses.
If the farmers themselves weren’t aware of what aspects of their farms to present to foreign buyers, the Consejo assisted them by framing the interviews with general questions that allowed the farmers to explore several aspects of their land, personal history and product.

Each interviewer was given a gentle reminder of what to look for in the farm visits. Photos were emphasized and the Consejo gave each team of interviewers a digital SLR camera to snap pictures of the farm, plants and people. The Consejo reminded the interviewers to take photos of the people on the farm, any “social projects” being undertaken, birds, coffee plants, flowers and the foreman or manager of the farm. Most importantly, interviewers were encouraged to take pictures of “People. We want to put faces to the stories.” There was a bulleted list of all of the shots that would make good photographs.

It would be unfair to say that the identities of coffee producers and the narratives of production in El Salvador are simple constructions born out of a commercial relationship to the United States. These consumable identities do however meld private reflexivity with public displays of authenticity. The farm histories themselves, genealogies made for public consumption, are palimpsests of superimposed meaning, similar to Adorno’s conception of mass media as “…meanings superimposed on one another” (Adorno 2001:164). These multilayered meanings are what penetrate the consumer consciousness, operating on several registers to convey “surface content” and “hidden meaning” as they do their work (Adorno 2001: 165). Ultimately, these stories are aware of their audience
and are purposeful in their task of communicating experience. They are predictable, as Adorno’s critique of the age of mass consumption of culture would remind us. He looks to the predictability of conflicts, the stereotyping of characters and the pseudo-realism of modern mass media as forces that make the world itself easier to consume (Adorno 2001: 161). The relative predictability of modern narratives (as in the thrice told story of the Álvarez family’s patriarch, Emilio, or in the case of any of the twenty-three farm histories) allows us to identify with realistic dramas and understand how things fit into our neatly partitioned world. In the case of the Consejo’s farm interviews, certain details were occluded while others were sought out and desired. The coffee farms represented in the histories capture a uniquely Salvadoran tableau but the questions asked definitively shape the answers given making the narratives become a performance of El Salvador that is aware of itself in relation to its audience. It is in part the El Salvador of USAID’s imagination. The Consejo’s interview questions reflected USAID’s recommendation to emphasize the country’s “…unique status as a keeper and defender of heirloom and boutique varieties of coffee” and as a place with “artisan coffees, handcrafted by small farmers using traditional processing and shade canopy.”

With little exception, the final versions of the farm interviews were indistinguishable the one from the other. Every farm was proud and honored to have won, promising to make investments in social projects. The farm pictures were montages of dewy cafetos, foggy mountainsides and a few colonos, posing in Futból Club Barcelona jerseys with the owner of the farm. Time is suspended, and we as consumers are imbued with a sense of “nostalgia for the present” (Appadurai 1996: 30).
CONCLUSION:

In 2006, just having arrived to the country, I came armed with a notebook and some roughly sketched research questions, hoping to look at “coffee culture” in El Salvador. I had just met Diego Diaz the hostel owner who became my host and friend in Santa Ana. He eyed me as I asked him: “What are the rituals you associate with coffee?” Refusing to be tape-recorded, Diego snapped: “There are no rituals or religious elements or customs. Coffee culture is the families that have worked on the land.” He scoffed at my notebook and grabbed my pen. As I arched my neck to examine what he was writing, he peered over his glasses. Returning my book, I saw fourteen family names, “Bohemia Libre, 1961” “Álvarez Córdova” and “FDR.”

These fragments made no sense to me until I came back to live with Diego in 2007. The fourteen names were “Las catorce,” Bohemia Libre was the magazine that had popularized the myth of the fourteen family dynasty. Enrique Álvarez Cordóva was a member of the Álvarez family who had founded the FDR, had fought tirelessly for the establishment of the cooperative el Jobo and had been brutally kidnapped and assassinated by death squads who thought him to be a traitor to his class. Not the things that I had come to study, the class, family and national identities that were scribbled on the page were part of Diego’s lived reality in the world of coffee, a world of coffee so far removed from the Washington DC lattes that had fueled my research question.

17 John Lamperti’s book Enrique Álvarez Cordova: Life of a Salvadoran Revolutionary and Gentleman tells the story of Enrique Álvarez, founder of the Democratic Revolutionary Front. Álvarez Cordova is a controversial figure in a controversial history. Born into privilege, Álvarez Cordova came to reject his place in the Salvadoran oligarchy and set about trying to effect change on the political level.
Diego was conscious of what it meant to be from one of the “fourteen families,” openly pensive about the burden and the privilege it afforded him. He had lived abroad and had looked in on his own country from the outside, aware of the rigidity of Salvadoran elite identity and of his own role in maintaining his society, acknowledging its imperfections while fiercely defending it. Diego was aware of the way his local world was perceived, commenting on the “yanqui” buyers and government agencies that got fat off of coffee profits. In taking away my notebook, he challenged me and the rhetoric of “Fair Trade,” Starbucks and U.S. consumption. How could I talk about elites exploiting workers when I drank coffee every day? In offering me Enrique Álvarez Cordova, he plied me to look beyond the tired narratives of the elite to find the spaces, the differing ways in which the members of the Álvarez family had chosen to participate in their local world. In offering me Álvarez Cordova and through his sardonic sense of humor, he set the terms of our relationship and the tone of my Salvadoran coffee experience.

As I considered how to conclude, my thoughts and emotions swung between El Salvador and Washington DC. In mid-July, however, an event transpired that speaks to the marrow of this thesis, demonstrating the relevance and possibilities that coffee has in the everyday province of our “local worlds.” On a balmy DC summer day, July 14, 2007 to be exact, Jeff Simmermon entered Murky Coffee in Arlington, Virginia and asked for a shot of espresso over ice. He was refused service. He then asked for a shot of espresso and a cup of ice. The barista refused Simmermon this request, explaining: “This is our store policy, to preserve the integrity of the coffee. It’s about the quality of the drink, and diluting the espresso is really not cool with us.” Simmermon protested, eventually settling
on an iced Americano but feverishly blogged about the event when he returned home.

Threatening arson and boycott, his invectives were punctuated by a photo-shopped example of the tip he left in the store’s tip jar, a dollar bill on which he wrote: “Fuck you and your precious coffee policy.”

Owner Nick Cho responded, explaining the cardinal rules of Murky: “We don’t do espresso over ice. Why? Number one, because we don’t do it. Number two, because we don’t do it.” Other rules: no sleeping in the shop, no modifications to the classic cappuccino, no questions asked about the $5 hot chocolate and no espresso served in to go cups. Pushing the online conversation toward larger issues, Cho explained:

There’s a craft to coffee that most people haven’t been exposed to. When we first opened our shop, nobody had ever seen “latte art” before, or was thinking about coffee bean varietals. Just as the average person understands at least that a “merlot” is different from a “chardonnay,” maybe someday people will understand that a coffee brewed from bourbon varietal from a particular coffee farm in El Salvador is different from a particular lot of Yirgacheffe from Ethiopia. Right now, to most people, coffee is coffee, just like a Diet Coke is a Diet Coke.

*The Washington Post* followed the online exchange as hundreds of people posted on Simmermon’s blog (andiamnotlying.com) and the Murky website. Staff writer Joe Heim interviewed Cho and the barista who had started it all. The short article: “Espresso, Extra Bitter” commented on the drink request and paid particular attention to blogging as the supreme outlet for “…literate victims of perceived everyday injustices in the 21st century” (Heim 2008). Ultimately, in their own separate ways Simmermon, Cho and *The
Washington Post agreed that “it’s just coffee,” the Post glibly concluding, “Can’t we all just get a-latté?”

The Murky incident speaks to the specific evolutionary moment in which coffee as commodity and craft finds itself and to the way in which the media, a product of modernity, opens new possibilities for communication and conflict. The clash between Cho and Simmermon was articulated through a material relationship and mediated by an electronic community. As a coffee professional, Cho’s dramatic stance challenges the assumptions that render coffee mundane. As a discerning and fetishized consumer, Simmermon found his consumption choices limited by taste protocols that were created to legitimate both a discrete physical commodity and the identity of a local and global professional community. Cho and Simmermon’s conflict demonstrates the new world of specialty coffee in which consumers and producers can have different conversations, conversations that are just now becoming meaningful possibilities.

In the rhetoric of specialty coffee, U.S. consumers are encouraged to see themselves as forming part of a larger system but are also called upon to make the gutsy and individual choice to consume specialty coffee over other options. In a moment of what Schudson has called “capitalist realism” (Schudson 1984) a history of exploitation and domination are elided as coffee is involved in debates that disembodied it from the conditions under which it was produced (Mathieu 1999:114). These tensions, between individual choice and collective demand, between capitalist realism and reality are at the core of specialty coffee consumption. Demand for specialty coffee reifies a relationship
to the producing “other” and signifies important things within our consumer society that make our taste preferences and consumption choices mean something different. Among Salvadoran coffee farmers, a new cultural history is being unearthed, revisiting the past in search of possibilities for the future. Through coffee, an ever more connected world attempts to fuse “taste” and “place” as producers and consumers alike renew and deconstruct a cultural and economic dialogue.
Works Cited


Counter Culture Coffee. 2008 “Origins”


