

Savage Minds

Notes and Queries in Anthropology

A seat at the bar: Issues of race and class in the world of specialty coffee

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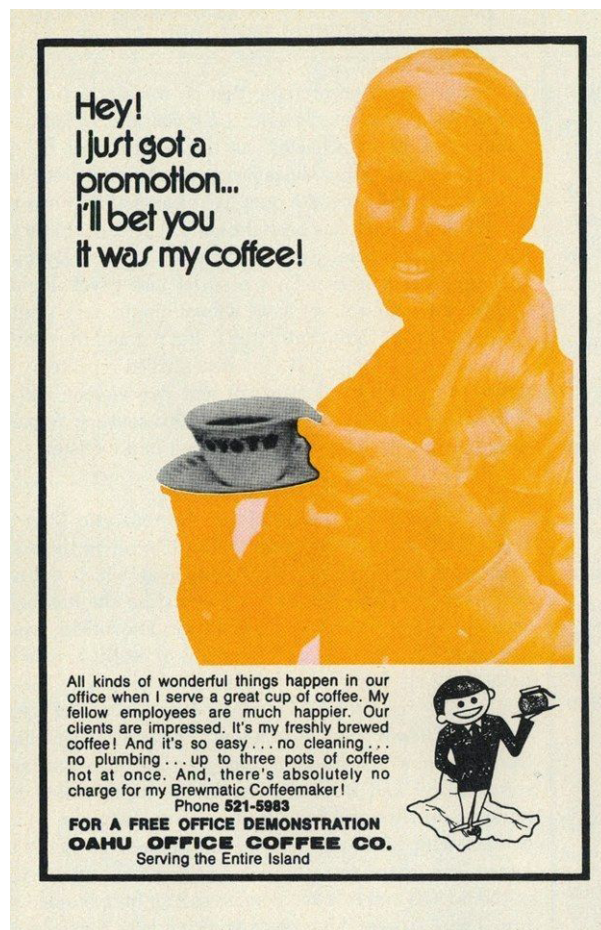
👤 Ryan

This entry is part 3 of 3 in the **Anthropologies #22** series.

For the third installment of the anthropologies food issue, we have an essay from William Cotter and Mary-Caitlyn Valentinsson. –R.A.*

From a Caffeinated Elite to Average Joes

If you're in academia, you probably have a very close relationship with coffee. For most Americans, coffee feels like a necessary part of our day, crucial to our higher-order cognitive functioning. Coffee has been a staple in American households and workplaces for over 100 years, and coffee as a commodity is one of the most widely traded and profitable items on the international market (Pendergrast 1999). In early 19th century, coffee served as a strong index for the elite classes of American society. It was expensive, often challenging to obtain, and was consumed primarily within prestigious social circles. However, the increasing reach of white European imperialism and the fine-tuning of the mechanisms of colonial trade and exploitation led to such resources becoming accessible to a wider range of consumers. In less than a century, the notion of coffee as a beverage consumed in the drawing rooms of the upper crust eroded. Coffee instead became a ubiquitous fixture of the American working class, tied to notions of cheery productivity and the booming prosperity of the American labor force (Jimenez 1995).



Source: **Mitch O'Connell**.

New class-stratified consumption practices

Despite the place of coffee as a common fixture in the American psyche, there is an accumulation of evidence to suggest that the social meaning of coffee is again shifting. Today, it seems that coffee is being enregistered (Agha 2003), or is coming to be seen as, a symbol of a "higher class" America. But instead of the narrowly defined American elite of the past, coffee, and specifically "specialty" or "craft" coffee, is becoming an increasingly important part of the "yuppie", "hipster" experience. Craft coffee in the United States is an industry of skilled artisans, focused on delivering handmade products to their communities. This reorientation in the American coffee industry towards a more craft-focused ideal is closely tied to the emergence and growth of independent micro-roasters and coffee shops that offer a "local", community-centered alternative to the mass market coffee franchises that have until recently dominated the landscape of American coffee consumption (Roseberry 1996).

But specialty coffee, like other craft industries in the United States, comes with a high price tag. While the \$.99 cup of coffee still exists, the world of specialty coffee is limited to those who can economically participate in the industry by paying \$5 or more for a cup of coffee. This conspicuous consumption indexes an investment in not just the coffee itself, but also in how the coffee is grown, harvested, roasted, and brewed. At the same time, consumption of specialty coffee reifies the divide between the \$.99 cup of coffee and the \$5 cup of coffee. This is one way in which forms of stratification tied to wider issues of race and class in the United States become concrete.

The physical spaces that specialty coffee shops and roasters occupy play an important role in the wider landscape of the industry. In many cases, specialty coffee storefronts are opening their doors in urban areas undergoing gentrification. The white yuppies and hipsters at the vanguard of these changes hold an economic status that makes a five dollar cup of coffee affordable, something that in many cases cannot be said for the historical residents of these areas.

The symbiosis between the consumption-based desires of this new upper-middle class and the services provided by the specialty coffee industry creates a situation in which craft industries feed off these larger urban development projects. Gentrification encourages new specialty establishments. At the same time, the existence and proliferation of specialty coffee, in these locations, further encourages gentrification through the availability of the commodities that the new upper-middle class feel they "need".

Now, coffee consumption has been imbued with new social meaning: it is a beverage for yuppies and hipsters, strongly associated with cool city-life in edgy, hip neighborhoods. For these educated, critical consumers, the "authenticity" of the coffee they consume matters. The origin, farming, growing, and trading practices, that go into a bag of coffee beans are all indexes that point to "good quality coffee".

Discourses of authenticity and community

The historical association between coffee and the American elite brought with it a discourse of exclusion, a walling off of those particular

social circles and the denial of the connections between coffee and race, colonialism, and lower-class America. This discourse gave way to one more heavily focused on the inherent properties of coffee to help people lead more productive, happy, and fulfilled lives through their consumption. The language of productivity and what coffee can do for consumers, their families, and their homes represents a hallmark of the period of American coffee consumption connected more directly with the working class.



Source: **The Bean Stalker**. Originally printed in the Saturday evening post.

Today, in the specialty coffee world the emerging aesthetic is rooted in a new form of elitist discourse, intertwined with the fetishization of authenticity and community building around how coffee is sourced and produced. These processes are enacted in the public face of the specialty coffee industry and the projection of their stories and values to the customers and consumers. One part of this is how they present their commercial identity through the language they use on their websites. The analysis and discussion of the public web presence of some of the major specialty coffee roasters presented below provides one means by which we can view these processes playing out across the industry.

Sourcing

The best coffee grows in the most remote places. There is a thin band that goes around the world near the equator. Within that band, you need mountains, thick old-growth forest and just the right microclimate. Set aside up to four days to get there.

On your way there, you'll pass through Houston's H.W. Bush Intercontinental Airport, or you'll stand in the endless security line at New York's JFK en route to distant parts of Ethiopia, Colombia, Indonesia and 10 other countries around the world.

You'll also experience 8 vaccines (the malaria pills—which can cause hallucinations and nightmares—are the worst), a passport that fills up with handwritten visas, bumpy eight-hour van rides, granola bars and in at least one case, eating the heart of a bull that has been slaughtered in your honor.

Source: **Stumptown Coffee Roasters**.

A recurring theme we see in the discourses of specialty coffee is a focus on authenticity rooted in the exotification of coffee as an article of consumption. Coffee at its source is distant, remote, embedded in a different way of life than that of the consumer. Indeed, this remoteness is what makes this coffee "the best".

SOURCING



The coffees we end up bringing to Vancouver are the result of determination and passion from the farmers and all parties along the supply chain working to preserve that initial hard work.

The people we work with are up at the crack of dawn, tirelessly working towards a plentiful and sweet harvest. They are vibrant members of their communities. We love working with them.

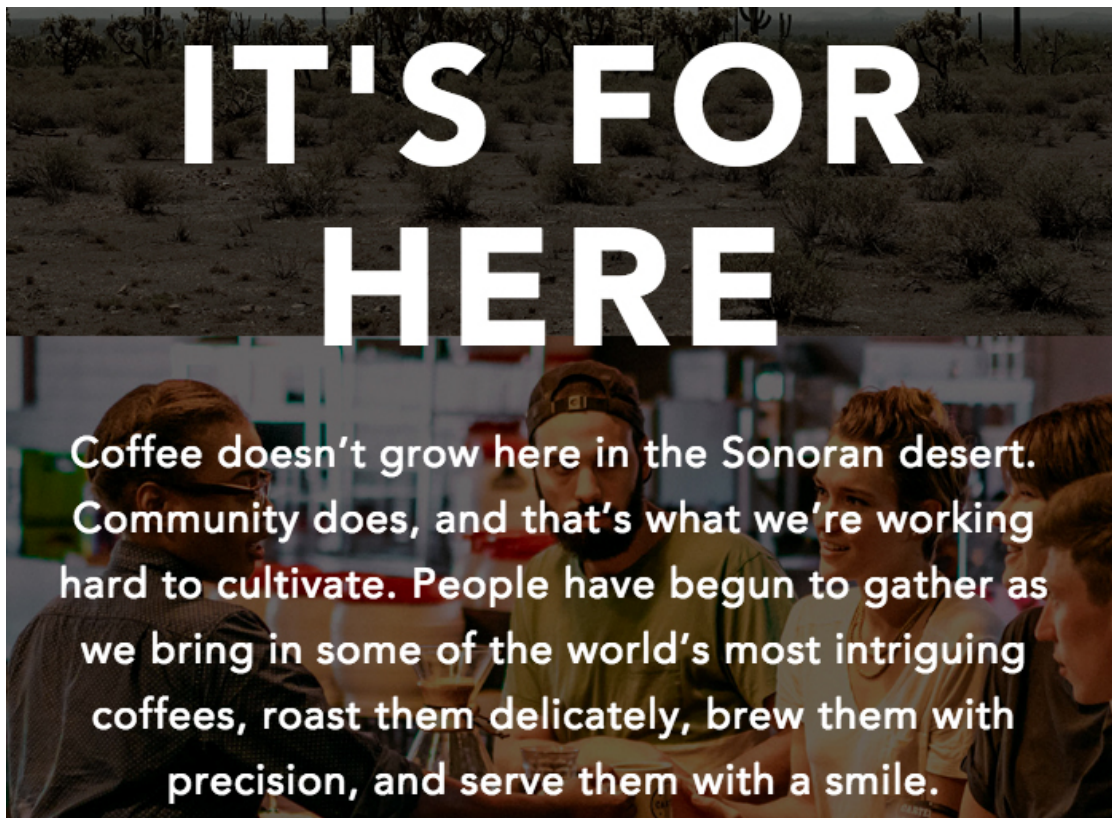
These People for Example



Source: **49th Parallel**.

In addition to the exotification of place itself, discourses of specialty coffee also authenticate their products by referencing the farmers themselves. This commodification of brown bodies as the source of authentic coffee suggests an intimacy with the other side of the supply chain. In reality, of course, most consumers will have no contact with these communities. Instead, their consumption mimics a connection with the farmer which allows the consumer to participate in a kind of "cultural tourism", aligning themselves with the "authentic", salt-of-the-earth coffee growers, and yet maintaining their own position in the global racial and socioeconomic hierarchies.

Beyond the actual product, specialty coffee discourse regularly highlights the cultivation and development of community, centered around the roaster and cafe. Coffee houses have long been viewed as intellectual and community hubs and this remains an important part of how the specialty coffee industry views itself (Gaudio 2003). Because the current industry discourse highlights the exotic nature of coffee, the consumer's participation in this "community" allows them an imagined entrée to this exclusive, unique space.



Source: **Cartel Coffee Lab**.

Although Cartel does reference its access to the exotic locales of authentic coffee growth ("...bring in some of the world's most intriguing coffees..."), it centralizes the role of "community". Here, the most important aspect of an authentic coffee consumption experience is one that's not solitary, but engaged, collaborative, and communal. Contiguous to this idea is the notion of "service with a smile"—in other words, the experience of coffee is one to be celebrated as part of a larger shared community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

An informal gathering for coffee and conversation, simply stated, is what Klatch Coffee is. I [Mike] was in college and while there was an abundance of coffee to fuel my late night studies, the quality level left something to be desired. Sure there were many a quaint coffeehouse claiming "we buy only the best coffee," but the claim fell short once it got in the cup. It was this experience that brought me to wonder, "Why not bring together the charm and comfort of a traditional coffeehouse and serve world class specialty coffees?" And with this thought, the Klatch Coffee of today began. That same year, my wife and I opened the first of our locations. Each of our stores is built on the foundation of being a common gathering place, where people are invited to linger and Klatch while experiencing true specialty coffee.

Let's Klatch about Coffee

At Klatch Coffee we deliver an experience that is casual and social, all-American, and traditional that most of all, is real. But don't let our laid back nature fool you into thinking we are slouching on quality. When it comes to serving specialty coffee, the right way, the best way, is the only way Klatch will allow. Our claims to offer the best are one thing, but as a customer, you can hang your hat on the following - we do:

- Only espresso ever awarded "Best Espresso in the World" at the World Barista Championships
- Coffee Review awarded our espresso an impressive 94 points, their highest rated espresso
- Coffee Review has awarded over 80% of our coffees with a score of 90 or above
- Our Ethiopian and Panama Coffee's have won the coveted "Best in Brew" from Ultimate Barista Challenges in Los Angeles, Orlando and New York

Award winning coffees are created as a result of nurturing relationships with the farmers who grow the beans. It is our belief that the art of the Klatch begins right where the seeds are planted. We painstakingly travel the globe to ensure we have the first look at the finest results of each harvest. Our commitment to honest business practices means we build trust and loyalty with the farmers we work with.

Source: **Klatch Coffee**.

Here, Klatch coffee juxtaposes the "charm and comfort of a traditional coffeehouse" with "world class specialty coffees". Once, coffee as "fuel" did not overlap with specialty or craft coffees. But Klatch does not seek

to distance itself from the quintessentially "American" coffee experience. Instead, it offers a reimagining of what coffee can or should mean for consumers. Coffee is still a "slap in the face" in the morning, but it has also gone beyond that and has become emblematic of a certain lifestyle. This lifestyle is one in which coffee is appreciated for characteristics beyond its ability to "fuel" consumers, such as the "nurturing (i.e., authentic, progressive, first-world) relationships with the farmers who grow the beans", the attention to the ground "right where the seeds are planted", and the "commitment to honest business practices". This discourse allows the consumer to be a part of these relationships through their consumption.

Specialty coffee and its consumption are marketed as an open door to a larger community, one that serves as a gatekeeper to a more authentic coffee experience—specifically by connecting the consumer with the actual farmers and growers in remote, exotic lands. It provides consumers with a collective of baristas, roasters, sourcers, and producers who serve as an anchor through which consumers can locate and live their consumption. However, as we have argued, this experience and the notions of authenticity and communality that it entails are available to only a portion of an American populous that starts their day and lives their lives through coffee consumption. Despite its communal and authentic discourse, specialty coffee remains walled off by larger socio-economic and racial hierarchies that delimit who takes part in the coffee industry, their roles, and their seat at the bar.

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Argentine fans of US popular culture. She can be found on Twitter @mary_caitlyn, and at academia.edu/MaryCaitlynValentinsson.

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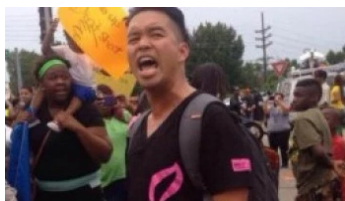
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