

Indexicalities of class in the materiality of coffee talk
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Introduction

In the 19th century, coffee was seen as a material product indexical of the American elite; less than a century later it had been transformed into a fixture of the working class (Jimenez 1995). Currently, coffee's status as a symbol of productivity and the American labor force has endured. Yet there has been a recent accumulation of evidence suggesting that coffee is becoming newly enregistered (Agha 2007) as a material symbol of the upper-middle-class experience in the United States. Specifically, the "specialty" or "craft" coffee industry positions itself as a community-centered alternative to coffee produced by mass franchises (Roseberry 1996). Linguistic anthropologists have shown the conspicuous consumption of specialty food to be a site for the construction of class-based identities (Gaudio 2003, Silverstein 2003). We investigate these processes through an analysis of coffee "cupping"—coffee tasting events that constitute an important part of the specialty coffee industry.

Through this analysis, we show how class is indexed in the production of specialty coffee discourse at cupping events. The sensory discourse of coffee, in connecting the quotidian experience of coffee to exotic, rarefied ingredients and production processes, elevates coffee from an everyday American experience to one that indexes an emerging class-based American identity. At the same time, broader discourses of specialty coffee consumption indicate a desire to locate an 'authentic' specialty coffee experience in the bodies and lands of marginalized places and people. We take these contrasting experiences to argue that coffee as a form of material consumption illuminates the (primarily white, upper-middle class) anxiety about wealth

and race in the United States, as well as the broader changing socio-economic landscape of the country.

The emergence of distinction in specialty coffee and wine

The initial rise of specialty coffee in the U.S. occurred in the 1980s, at a time when overall coffee consumption was declining nationally. This dramatic upswing in the growth of specialty coffee took place outside of the gaze of major food companies and conglomerates, who largely ignored the movement, viewing it as a fad until specialty coffee gained a significant market share (Roseberry 1996, p. 767). This process culminated in the birth of the Specialty Coffee Association of America in 1982, which gave institutional support and a substantial push forward for this growing industry, moving it towards wider recognition in the coffee world (Baker 2013).

Originally, specialty coffee was marketed heavily towards the sectors of American society who distinguished themselves from others through material consumption practices. Their consumption practices were then described as a kind of “pre-industrial” nostalgia (Roseberry 1996, p. 773), in that the consumption of coffee in the modern day has become ubiquitous with the American working class, but has at its core a more bourgeoisie foundation, cultivated in the elite coffee houses and drawing rooms of the 17th and 18th centuries. Our investigation of specialty coffee discourse supports this view of the specialty coffee industry. However, we argue that an attention to the linguistic and discursive practices that construct both individual consumption and wider industry norms is necessary in order to fully understand the role of materiality as an index of class identity.

In his work on oinoglossia, Silverstein (2003) highlights that wine as a comestible has

traditionally been marketed to the “yuppie” and affluent classes of American society (p.222).

The consumption and discussion of wine is constructed as a largely “elite” practice. Silverstein argues that through “proper” forms of consumption, we ritually become the individuals that the wine talk register indexically denotes—that is, “the well-bred, characterologically interesting (subtle, balanced, intriguing, winning, etc.) person iconically corresponding to the metaphorical ‘fashion of speaking’ of the perceived register’s figurations of the aesthetic object of connoisseurship” (Silverstein 2003, p.226). In encountering this register, the degree and method of engagement with the wine world positions speakers in a particular social relationship to the industry and all that it entails. As Silverstein notes, “Elites and would-be elites in contemporary society seek to use these enregistered forms; using them confers (indexically entails) an aspect of eliteness- before-prestige-commodities, of which ‘distinction’ is made.” (Silverstein 2003, p. 226).

In this study, the investigation of coffee cupping discourses adds additional support to this analysis. A discussion of oinoglossia provides an important conceptual and theoretical grounding by which we can locate the discourse of specialty coffee cupping on par with that of the wine industry (Baker 2013, p. 326). Our analysis views the discourse of specialty coffee and its material transformation through language—visible in its emphasis on “tasting notes” and discussions focused on material processes connected to production—as a productive site for the discussion of how linguistic materiality intersects with modern class anxieties in the American context.

Bergamot, plum brandies, and fruit laden merlots

The data analyzed in this paper is based on participant observation in coffee cuppings held at specialty coffee establishments in Tucson, AZ and Chicago, IL, as well as the first author’s two

years of personal experience as a member of the specialty coffee industry. The process of coffee cupping has largely been standardized, as these events are typically utilized by coffee buyers who are interested in sampling coffees before purchase. The protocols published by the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA 2015) have allowed for a large degree of continuity across the industry to aid in this process.

The opportunity for customers and consumers to take part in these events is a more recent occurrence. As the specialty coffee industry has become more visible in the United States, more and more consumers have gained interest in what it is that coffee professionals do and what they look for in their coffees. Consumer participation in cupping makes it possible for customers to gain some level of expert knowledge about the flavor profiles and sensory experiences of a given coffee, providing them with the linguistic tools to better describe and discuss coffee as part of their experience of material consumption.

Cupping begins with the grinding of the coffees to be evaluated. This results in an initial evaluation by participants of the dry aroma of the coffees. This stage of evaluation is conducted by agitating the coffee grounds and describing the scents of this dry aroma. At each stage in the evaluation, participants describe the tasting “notes” –remarks on the sensory characteristics of the coffee’s taste and aroma – on prepared cupping sheets for each of the coffees being evaluated during a given event. Following an evaluation of the dry aroma, the coffees are steeped in hot water for four minutes. After steeping, participants break the crust that develops on the coffee samples, dragging their spoons across the top of the coffee and evaluating the coffee’s wet aroma. In the final general stage, the coffee grounds from the top of the wet aroma samples are removed, letting the coffees cool further for an additional three minutes, before tasting begins. The coffees are tasted in small amounts, with specially designed tasting spoons, and participants

are encouraged to spit out the coffees after each taste, cleansing their palettes with seltzer water in an effort to be able to better evaluate each coffee in turn. Participants continually note different flavor profiles of the coffees as they progress through the process, developing an overall picture of each unique coffee from the evaluation of the dry aroma to the tasting phase (SCAA 2015).

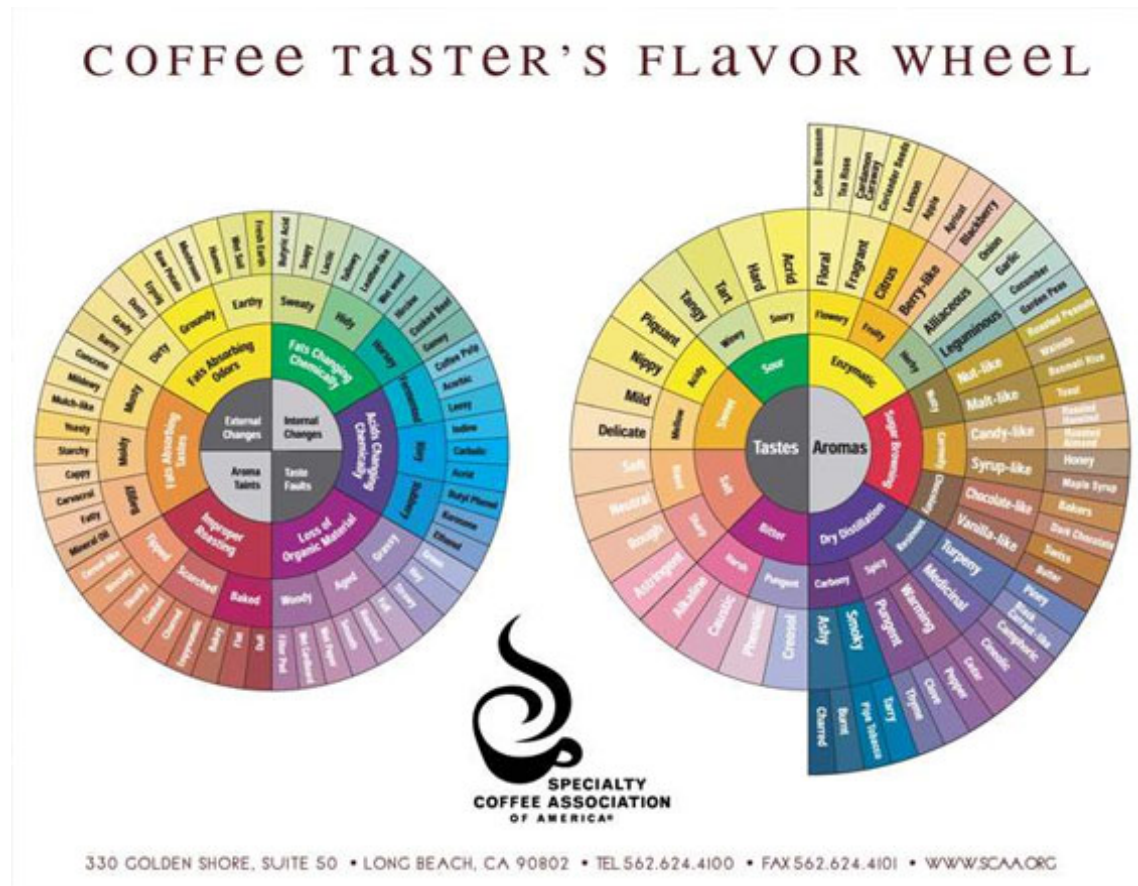


Figure 1. Coffee tasting wheel (SCAA 2015)

These evaluations take the form of a wide range of lexical descriptors that coalesce to form a larger “flavor profile”, a collective description of the coffee’s various flavor characteristics as determined at each stage of the cupping process. The terms and flavors

depicted in the coffee tasters flavor wheel published by the Specialty Coffee Association of America (Figure 1) provide a general overview of the linguistic resources common in this sensory and discursive practice. These flavor profiles are, of course, unique to each participant in the process, as each taster will have a different palate. Additionally, within the specialty coffee industry, it is common for establishments to train their staff on palate expansion through events held for employees encouraging them to experience a wide variety of scents and tastes by sampling many different products. This process of palate expansion provides professionals in the coffee industry with a larger sensory vocabulary that they then draw on in evaluating coffees. Larger trends do emerge, with similar “tasting notes” arising from multiple different participants’ accounts of the coffees, and a larger discussion typically develops during these events about the specifics of each coffee and the unique flavors that each one offers.

Consumer’s knowledge of and access to the flavors or “notes” of an expanded palate entails their participation in these evaluative processes. However, as we discuss below, access to these forms of knowledge and experience are not uniform. The ability to participate in these discursive practices are mitigated by socioeconomic barriers that limit participation and create in and out-group experiences associated with the specialty coffee industry.

Based on the participatory data collected from coffee cuppings, and the body of lexical descriptors used in these events, the descriptions of a given coffee can range from dry aromas conjuring notes of tobacco, earthy flavors, peach fuzz, and root beer to more exotic descriptors of the coffees that locates them as similar to bergamot, plum brandy, and fruit laden merlots. These lexical descriptors often draw on exotic and rarefied ingredients, completely external to the coffee itself. Through these linguistic practices, coffees and production processes are

linguistically situated in exotic, far-flung countries. Along with the physical process of cupping, these words contribute to making the sensory experience of coffee material.

Through the use of lexical descriptors that draw on the exotic, the foreign, and the rarefied, we argue that participants in specialty coffee cuppings construct a social dynamic that situates themselves above the working-class associations that coffee has entailed in the past and transforms coffee consumption into a socially prestigious material good. Similar to Silverstein (2003)'s analysis of the ritual transformation of wine consumers into the social type denoted by oiglossia through the use of this register, we argue that in utilizing coffee's own unique register, the beverage itself and the bodies of those who consume it are elevated to higher sociocultural status. In the following section we'll show how these specific sensory descriptors connect to the development of a new class based identity for upper-middle class Americans. We argue that this identity carries with it a sense of class-based anxiety that plays out in the linguistic and economic participation in the specialty coffee industry.

The intersection of caffeine and new class based identities

Many scholars have already noted the various changing aspects of socioeconomic class and its relation to identity, particularly in the United States (Alfrey 2010). Despite the very bipolar and deeply entrenched economic disparities between the wealthy and the poor and middle-classes, the super-wealthy are no longer seen as the arbiters of taste (Baker 2013, Bourdieu 1984).

Indeed, in popular discourse, the tastes and styles of the very wealthy are often portrayed as old-fashioned, out-of-touch, and dated. This is linked to a turn to discourses of "authenticity"—the very perception of the wealthy as out-of-touch with 'real' people means that their tastes are also somehow inauthentic. Authenticity in taste (broadly) is instead conceived of as connecting to

marginalized groups—not just people of lower socioeconomic classes, but of marginalized racial and ethnic groups as well—and so aspects of style that are seen as originating among these groups are seen as more authentic (Johnston and Baumann 2014). Of course, it is not the case that these marginalized groups become suddenly valued by the mainstream. Instead, mainstream middle or upper-middle class white folks, who are distinguished from the extremely wealthy in the current American class dynamic, become the only legitimate carriers of these ‘authentic’ styles. The production and circulation of authenticity in these sectors of American society intersect with wider socioeconomic currents that are tied into the evolving racial dynamic of the United States.

We argue that the rise of specialty coffee can be located in this shifted/shifting class dynamic. As discussed above, in early 19th century America, coffee as a comestible was strongly associated with the elite. It was expensive, challenging to obtain, and 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). 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. With the shift in consumption patterns, however, 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.

Today, it seems that coffee in America is again becoming associated with an elite class. But instead of the narrowly defined, super-wealthy American elite of the past, coffee, and specifically specialty coffee, is becoming an increasingly important part of the “yuppie”, “hipster” experience. Specialty coffee in the United States is an industry of skilled artisans, focused on delivering handmade products to their communities. This new re-valuation of craft, skill, or technique embodied in human production—as opposed to locating technique and skill in machines and industrialization—is closely connected to the new class-based ideals of authenticity (Baker 2013, Manning 2010). Compared to the mid-20th century appreciation for the industrial and the mass-produced, new socioeconomic authenticities in the United States locate value in the individual and the unique, leading to a general increase in these sorts of specialty/craft industries. In the context of specialty coffee, this reorientation to a more specialty-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 endures, 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 in various aspects of the materiality of the coffee, such as where and how it is harvested, roasted, and brewed.

This investment manifests in cupping events through discussions of the various growing and processing practices of specific coffees, as well as their geographic locations, elevation, or soil content. Consumers aligned with this specialty coffee lifestyle interpret the origin, farming, growing, and trading practices, that go into a bag of coffee beans as indexes that point to “good quality coffee”. For instance, labels such as “fair trade”, “natural process”, or “fully washed”, point to specialized harvesting and production practices which, for specialty coffee consumers, distinguish high-quality specialty coffee from the brands available in the aisles of their neighborhood supermarket.

This new form of elitist discourse in specialty coffee has also become intertwined with the fetishization of the authenticity of the materiality of coffee. The consumers to whom specialty coffee is marketed—largely affluent, upper-middle class white people—are a group who feel a certain level of anxiety with respect to their own class status. While they typically see themselves as politically liberal and progressive in a way that distinguishes them from the very wealthy elite, their privileged position in global economic markets undermines this distinction, and their class anxieties manifest socially and materially through their consumption practices (cf. Middleton 2013, p.609). This privileged position and their elevated socioeconomic status inherently diminishes their authenticity, and this uneasy position results in the participation in social and linguistic practices that can offset the class anxiety at the heart of this condition. One way in which these consumers mitigate this anxiety is by centralizing the role of the people who grow and harvest their coffee in an effort to highlight their own status as mindful consumers. Coffee at its source is distant, remote, embedded in a different way of life than that of the consumer; this (literal) rooting of specialty coffee in exotic locales is part of what authenticates this product as ‘specialty’. 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. This intimacy is rooted in a desire for real social and material connections with the producers of the products they consume.

In reality, of course, most consumers will have no contact with these communities. Instead, their consumption mimics a connection with the farmer and in doing so allows the consumer to participate in a kind of “cultural tourism”, aligning themselves with salt-of-the-earth coffee growers—again, constructing authenticity through association with marginalized groups-- and yet maintaining their own position in the global racial and socioeconomic hierarchies. We argue, then, that white, upper-middle class consumers of specialty coffee discursively center the role of the third world people of color who grow their coffee in an effort to align themselves with the authenticity and proximity to the earth and production that non-white bodies represent (cf. Orlove 1998) and away from disconnected, wealthy, white, first-world consumers. The result is the mitigation of class based anxieties about their own in/authenticities through these imagined connections.

On the other hand, specialty coffee consumers appear to also engage in other practices that reinforce the connection between specialty coffee and a privileged, elite class. Our analysis of specialty coffee cuppings shows us that it is not sufficient to consume specialty coffee in the same way one would consume a \$.99 ‘cup of joe’. Coffee cuppings socialize consumers into the use of a technical language in order to discursively produce the materiality of their consumption practices as rarefied and esoteric—in other words, far from the ‘salt-of-the-earth’ authenticity of the coffee growers. Specialty coffee is not simply fuel for a proletariat worker (although it may also serve this function), but a luxury comestible requiring specialized knowledge in order to

properly enjoy (Silverstein 2003). Learning to describe coffee as having notes of “bergamot” or having the flavor of “plum brandy or a very fruit-forward merlot” explicitly transforms the material experience of coffee from fuel for working-class productivity to a product meant for leisurely and satisfying indulgence.

The physical locations of many specialty coffee shops/roasters reinforces this discourse. 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 specialty coffee affordable, a status that in many cases does not apply to 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 specialty 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”.

From proletarian hunger killer to assuaging class anxiety

Unlike other specialty or luxury comestibles, such as wine, coffee has not always been considered prestigious nor has it always been associated with elites, power, and privilege.

Originally consumed by the wealthy elite, coffee was transformed first into fuel for American working-class productivity; later, as the new ‘hipster’ class of American elites located authenticities in marginalized groups, coffee has again been transformed into a symbol of conspicuous consumption for upper-middle class whites. The enregisterment of specialty coffee talk is distinct from registers like oinoglossia (Silverstein 2003) because it reflects uneasy footings in multiple class-based identities, and in particular the uneasy privilege of today’s young upper-middle class, rather than simply indexing a singular link to the upper classes. On the one hand, the selection of coffee as a food item to re-envision as a marker of status is rooted in new discourses of authenticity that see ‘realness’ only in marginalized groups, including the working class.

Specialty coffee consumers and producers build on this relationship by centralizing the role of the third-world, and specifically, the nonwhite farmers who grow and harvest the coffee beans. Knowledge of where your coffee is grown, as well as who grows and harvests the beans, is central in authenticating the material experience of consuming specialty coffee. In this way, the affluent white consumers of specialty coffee assuage their class anxiety—if they know all of these details about the sources and means of production, they aren’t the out-of-touch, wealthy 1% who disregards the wellbeing of the working classes. However, people who drink specialty coffee are also socialized into a discourse that elevates the material experience of coffee far from the workaday, common man’s experience of the beverage. The method of describing specialty coffee via “tasting notes” transforms the experience of coffee consumption from a simple consumption of caffeine to an esoteric experience. In connection with discourses that centralize the role of the nonwhite bodies who grow and harvest the specialty coffee, this language is part of a larger semiotic landscape that is tied to transnational conceptualizations of class (and race).

Much of the work on specialty coffee in the United States has highlighted this perspective in similar ways. As Baker (2013) writes, “[t]he methods of evaluating specialty coffee currently in vogue also allow for this not overtly exclusionary form of social distinction... These techniques allow for social boundaries and status to be reinforced without directly challenging the democratic inclusiveness favored in the U.S” (p. 315), which is precisely the view of specialty coffee consumption we advocate for here. The importance of the analysis offered here is the detail and rigor of the linguistic analysis of the register of specialty coffee talk which is taught and learned at specialty coffee cuppings. This linguistic lens allows us to see in much greater detail the role that materiality plays in transforming coffee from the “proletarian hunger killer” beverage (Mintz 1979) into a product which, when consumed in the right fashion, accompanied by the correct language, allows the drinker to assuage upper-middle class white anxieties about class and race stratifications on a transnational level.

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