

# THE ENDS OF COFFEE: STATE, WORK, AND IDENTITY IN POST-CAFTA COSTA RICA

by

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# **ABSTRACT**

The Ends of Coffee: State, Work, and Identity in Post-CAFTA Costa Rica

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Thesis directed by Dr. Donna Goldstein

This dissertation is an ethnography of a people, a place, and a plant, in which I follow the ways in which ideas about what makes coffee good, and what makes good coffee, change across space and time. I take a multi-sited approach that combines participant-observation within the specialty coffee industry and with coffee growers in the Orosi Valley of Costa Rica. Coffee production once supported and is now challenging Costa Rica's welfare state model. It provided the financial backing for the welfare state via taxes while its organization of social life maintained the values of equality and obligation on which the state's ideological apparatus rested. That is, coffee engendered a sense of social responsibility and conciliation in Central America, where militarism and rule of the few was the norm. Costa Ricans thus credit coffee for their exceptionalism, and it anchors national identity.

Since the 1980s, however, the ways in which farmers labor and connect with the state have been refigured. During that decade the price of coffee collapsed, Nicaraguans fleeing the Contra War arrived, and the first wave of economic liberalization began. Concomitantly, specialty coffee began offering consumers a higher quality product than conventional by focusing on the techniques and conditions of production at origin and the narration of a coffee's unique life history. This appears to defetishize the commodity by putting human relations at the center of the narrative, but instead its enactment serves to reinforce inequalities and object agency. Specialty offers higher prices, but at a cost that is not purely financial. Once-independent farmers must now meet buyer requirements under conditions that clash with the notions of reciprocity and independent decision-making that underpin sociopolitical life.

In 2009 CAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement, went into effect, and its implementation has bred distrust because it has begun dismantling state support systems. As first coffee and now the state have retreated from their roles as anchoring points for identity, Orosians express anxiety and fear about the future in terms that nostalgically recall a communal and cooperative past that, in contrast to today, epitomized Costa Rican identity and values.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although only my name appears as the author, any work such as this is the result of the efforts of hundreds of people, and I owe a debt to each of them. More than anything I am grateful and indebted to the people of Orosi, who are some of the most generous and warm-hearted people I have met. They answered my endless questions about coffee, and electricity, and water, and bus schedules, and cell phones, with patience and good humor. Had they been less willing to open up to me, this project could not have been realized. *Gracias amigos.*

Sara Mooij and Toine Verkuijlin were my first friends in Orosi, and they provided a home, fantastic meals, and conversations that went long into the night. Not only did they make it physically possible for me to conduct my research by allowing me to stay at the hostel for a year for free, they introduced me to dozens of people in town, kept me abreast of happenings when I was gone, and helped me analyze and understand what I was seeing. Their son, Thomas, kept me laughing and on my toes. The staff at OTIAC/Montaña Linda – Rafa, Margarita, Julia, Katty, Fabian, Wendy, Gloriana, Marko, Naty, Adrián, Magaly, and Felicia – were unfailingly kind to this *gringa* who kept coming back year after year.

Margarita Sánchez, Katty Ruiz, Magaly Mendez, Ramón Fernández, and Cindie Fisher became good friends, offering points and counterpoints to my own observations, feeding me, and introducing me to those with whom they thought I should speak. In addition, Katty and Cindie were particularly adept at introductions and helping me make connections, while without Ray I would not have been able to travel to Hojancha. Margarita, her daughter Thamara, and Magaly kept me laughing while providing insights into life and the state that I would have otherwise missed. Kenneth Ramírez, my research assistant, was not only an excellent photographer, he enabled me to visit and interview with dozens of people and then helped me put their stories into the wider Orosi context. Ana Beatriz Bravo proved an adept editor.

ICAFFE opened its doors and its library to me, and José Obando drove me around the Orosi Valley to show me ICAFFE's experimental fields. Elias, Linda, Ernesto, Nano, Sergio, Minor, and Dennis all provided essential insights into coffee production. Luis Arce and Luis Lamicq helped me understand tourism and the difficulties in promoting it and living from it in a town that had never had to struggle to attract visitors. Iván Molina Jiménez offered many hours of conversation about Costa Rica's social and economic history, while Carmen Caamaño Morúa at the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales provided critical feedback during the early stages of my analysis.

Though I am sometimes critical of the industry, I truly believe that specialty purveyors have the best interests of farmers at heart, even if they do not, to summarize Foucault, always know what what they do does. Mark Overly of Kaladi Coffee in Denver was particularly helpful in understanding changing notions of quality, the connections between social justice and buyer preference, and the strange world of acidity. Sherri Jones of the Alliance for Coffee Excellence allowed a novice cupper into her intermediate class in Honduras and provided a wealth of knowledge about the industry's growth and technical preferences, as did my classmates. The late Randy Wirth first introduced me to the world of coffee and inspired me to think critically about its origins and economic ramifications. His passion will be sorely missed. Bel Townsend, the first Dr. Coffee, helped me see the connections between waste and quality. All the people with whom I have spoken at coffee conferences, or while they were working behind the bar at a coffeeshop, also played a role in shaping the conclusions drawn here. Special thanks go to the International Coffee Organization, which supplied historical data on coffee production, trade, and pricing, and to the Specialty Coffee Association of America for allowing use of the flavor wheel and cupping form.

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The faculty of the University of Colorado are without peer when it comes to student support and encouragement. Chris Hammons read drafts and helped me see the bigger picture when I lost the forest for the trees. The insights and courses offered by committee members Carole McGranahan, Carla Jones, and Kaifa Roland shaped and provided the intellectual impetus for this dissertation in more ways than I think any of us expected. Catherine Tucker's work on coffee was additionally influential in shaping my thinking. My advisor, Donna Goldstein, has been a friend and advocate since my first day of graduate school, when I was a terrified teaching assistant for her class in method and theory. She has pushed me to write more clearly, think more deeply and more broadly, and to make connections that I could not otherwise see. Her wealth of knowledge of Latin America, agriculture, neoliberalism, and the politics of expertise, among other topics, were invaluable throughout the writing of this dissertation.

This entire project is my mother's fault. Had she not casually suggested one day in the fall of 2005 that it might be fun to open a bookstore/café, I would never have become interested in coffee or begun this research, and my life would have been the emptier for it. Joking aside, my family has always supported my intellectual and professional pursuits. My mother says she and my father helped me learn to read off cereal boxes because I couldn't stand not knowing what those symbols meant; I have not stopped since. Both she and my father inculcated in me a love of knowledge and an understanding of the injustices in the world from the very beginning. My brother Jake and sister-in-law Heather provided a place to stay in their tiny Manhattan apartment as well as humor and adult beverages. The Fischer and Yellen families were also unwavering in their support, and their dedication to the pursuit of excellence was something I learned, and saw enacted, from the time I was very young.

A mere "thank you" seems insufficient alongside all this support, and I hope I have made my gratitude to all these individuals, and to those who are not named, along the way. I dedicate this work to coffee farmers, in Costa Rica or elsewhere, who labor in the pursuit of something more. *La lucha sigue.*

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## Introduction

Coming in to the town of Orosi, Costa Rica, the road winds down and around through the valley of the same name, so that the town's lights are intermittently visible long before you reach it. The first time I visited Orosi, in May of 2008, I sat at the very back of the bus, my backpack and I squeezed in between two men with whom I engaged in pleasant conversation. As the bus finished its descent down the winding road that flattens out between coffee fields, they assured me that we were only a few minutes away and that they would tell me where to get off the bus in order to reach my destination.

That first trip I was the academic lead instructor for a high school Spanish immersion program. I was to lead two different groups of twelve students each, and I had arrived in Costa Rica a few days before the first group to prepare for their arrival. After rafting we would stay in Orosi for a week while the students lived with families and took Spanish classes, and I needed to talk with Sara, the language school owner, to make sure everything was ready. I needn't have worried. Sara, a Canadian, owned the Montaña Linda/OTIAC (Beautiful Mountain/Orosi Tourist Information and Arts Center) complex of businesses along with her Dutch husband, Toine. Montaña Linda included the school, a hostel, a guest house, a restaurant, and a tourist center. Sara turned out to be perhaps the most organized person I had ever met, and I liked her immediately.

Riding the bus that afternoon, however, I had no way of knowing that Orosi was about to become such an important part of my personal and professional life. I wasn't yet used to how quickly, and how early, the sun set, and despite the assistance of my new friends, I was a little worried about navigating in the dark. Sara's directions had been thorough, but I had spent enough time in Latin America to know that navigation is often far more complicated than it seems like it should be, particularly in the dark. Still, between the helpful men and the paper I'd printed out, I felt confident that I could find the hostel where I'd be spending the next two nights. The bus passed the soccer field in front of the famous colonial church, stopping what seemed like every six feet to let people off. The men

noded at me as we headed slightly uphill and stopped just before the grocery store: this was my stop. I shouldered my bag, made my way down the steep steps, and headed in what I hoped was the right direction.

Two minutes later, someone stopped me. “Good evening. Are you Kate?” she asked in Spanish. I had been in town for two minutes and already someone knew who I was. “The hostel is just down the road. Your room is ready, the key is in the door. Have a good night!” I had just met Magaly, who worked for Sara and Toine and who would also become a good friend. Her greeting me by name on the street made me feel like I was already home, a feeling that was reinforced when I met Sara, Toine, and their son Thomas, then four, the next day. It was reinforced every time I came down the hill in the bus and saw the lights of town on the valley floor, a sight that never ceased to move me. I fell in love with Orosi that first night, and the feeling has only grown stronger since.

On that first trip, I had no intentions of doing fieldwork in Orosi. When I left with the high school students at the end of the second homestay week, I was certain it was for the last time. The summer before I had spent two months in San Pedro la Laguna, Guatemala, doing research on coffee and structural violence for my master’s degree, and had intended to return for my doctoral research. But after speaking with Sara, Toine, Magaly, and the homestay families, I was intrigued by the fact that the sociopolitical context of coffee was in such sharp contrast to what I had learned in Guatemala. Coffee in Costa Rica seemed to be a source of individual and national pride, and from what I could tell in those first few weeks, it had engendered the middle-class lifestyle visible in town. In contrast, during my last week in San Pedro la Laguna, I had been casually warned that continuing to ask questions about land ownership, profit distribution, and *coyotes*, the middlemen who buy coffee from farmers and then sell it to the mills, would probably not end well for me: it was rumored that much of the coffee in the area was owned by narcotraffickers, who took advantage of the complex web that separates farmer from consumer to launder drug money.

Prior to graduate school I had spent a year living in El Paso and had witnessed what drug violence had done to my friends and their families across the border in Ciudad Juárez, and I had no intentions of getting anywhere near that business. So rather than face the risk of narcotrafficker anger, and in order to learn more about how coffee could be associated with poverty in Guatemala but with the middle class in Costa Rica, I opted to switch my fieldsite, and returned for two more summers to conduct pilot research in and around Orosi. In August of 2011, I began a year of fieldwork, returning for two more months in the summer of 2013 to clarify my findings. That summer I also traveled to two other coffee-producing towns, San Marcos Tarrazú and Hojancha de Guanacaste, in order to better situate Orosi in the Costa Rican coffee context. My last trip prior to completing the dissertation was in May of 2014, when I presented my findings first to the public in Orosi, and then in a public talk at the University of Costa Rica's Institute for Social Science Investigation.

Why choose coffee as the primary focus of my research? In 2005, my mother decided to open a bookstore in El Paso. She decided that it should also have coffee, and we decided that I should be in charge of that part of the store, since she didn't like coffee herself. And so my coffee journey began: from El Paso we drove to Ogden, Utah, where the late Randy Wirth of Caffé Ibis taught two neophytes, one of whom didn't even like coffee, how to make espresso and steam milk, so that we could sell his coffee without putting him to shame. In researching suppliers and certifications, I became interested in learning more about the social contexts and complexities of coffee production, which led me to graduate school in anthropology and eventually, to meeting Magaly on a dirt road in Orosi just as night was falling around us.

In this dissertation, I set out to explain that question that first caught my attention: what is so different about the Costa Rican context? The country is always described as an "exception" to the violence, poverty, and military rule that has plagued its neighbors since before independence from Spain in 1821. It is the country without an army, the country that wants to be carbon neutral by 2020, the

happiest country in the world for 2009 and 2012 – according to the New Economics Foundation, at least. But I did not want to think of Costa Rica as only an exception, or rather, I wanted to understand what thinking of oneself as exceptional did in everyday life. How did it shape ideas about belonging and nation, about who was in and who was out? What would people do if they could no longer think of themselves as exceptional, if their country followed the seemingly inevitable logic of neoliberalism by opening up its welfare state economy to increased foreign investment? That is, how did one narrate a history of exceptionalism in the face of a present that seems to be shaping up to be rather ordinary? And what did coffee have to do with all of this?

Costa Ricans use the phrase *pura vida*, literally meaning “pure life,” as a greeting, a question, and a description of a person’s character. Someone who is *pura vida* is a good person, trustworthy, but not high strung. *Pura vida* as a question is more or less asking if everything is all right, if things are going well. And *pura vida* can also be used as a response to a question, the response that yes, all is well. It has become a marketing slogan, written on everything from shot glasses to T-shirts to stuffed sloths, but it is still a phrase used unironically in everyday conversation. Would *pura vida*, and the relaxed, yet socially connected, lifestyle it invoked disappear? Had it already disappeared?

As this dissertation will demonstrate, Costa Ricans worry for the future of *pura vida*, though they do not do so in those precise terms. Coffee production was the backbone of national identity, of state funding, and of the idea of the exception. But the welfare state that coffee funded has been challenged by the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s and more recently, by the implementation of CAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement. At the same time, coffee has receded dramatically in importance in recent decades, aided by an international decline in the price of coffee, but also by changing ideas about what good coffee looks like and who is responsible for it. The reality is that the production of coffee no longer occupies a primary space in people’s lives or their understanding of the world. Its production no longer drives family and community relationships, provides the primary fuel for

GDP, or offers employment that connects one to the land and to the past. The fading away of coffee has been going on for twenty years or more, but, its importance was such that its loss is still being made sense of. While contemporary ideas about traceability and origin come out of industry desires to both improve working conditions for farmers and to highlight the unique attributes imbued by regional difference, they are at odds with the historical trajectory of Costa Rican production. Unlike in Guatemala, where coffee was mainly grown on large farms by landless, underpaid, often indigenous workers, in Costa Rica there were few landless farmers, and no indigenous labor force to exploit. Instead, coffee was seen as an occupation in which one made one's own decisions, was one's own boss, and worked in partnership with the mills that could transform raw coffee cherries into a finished product ready for export.

The result of this disjuncture in meaning is that few Orosians farm today, but coffee nonetheless remains their anchoring point for understanding and making sense of the world. As Costa Rica moves towards an ever-more neoliberal economy, however, coffee's lessons of mutual dependence and reliance on the family are less and less relevant. This has led to anxiety and fear about the future and particularly, the future of young adults who will not have the same touchstones of the welfare state and coffee production to ground them in an economy that requires not only different skills, but an entirely non-*pura vida* way of seeing the world. Coffee made the idea of *pura vida* possible, and coffee gave Costa Rica the stability to put the slogan on T-shirts. Its promise, like the promise of *pura vida*, remains, but it fades a little more with each passing year.

### ***Geographical Orientations***

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Costa Rica is a small country, roughly the size of West Virginia, and it is home to an estimated four million Costa Ricans and an additional half-million foreigners, mainly Nicaraguans. The *cordillera*, the mountain range that forms the "spine" of the Western hemisphere, runs northwest to southeast through the country, so that the Central Valley, where Orosi is located, sits at about 1000 meters above

sea level before sloping down gently on either side towards the Pacific and Caribbean coasts. The mountains create a number of different microclimates throughout the country, and are also effective in making it difficult to reach some areas, mainly those along the Panama border. The coasts are full of the beaches that have made the country so popular with international tourists, but are also home to rugged jungles, particularly near Tortuguero in the northeast and the Osa Peninsula in the southwest.

I conducted the majority of my fieldwork in Orosi, but Costa Rica's centralized government and



**Image 1: Map of Costa Rica**  
Orosi is southeast of Cartago. Hojanca is south of Nicoya. San Marcos is marked on the map.  
Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency

transit system required frequent trips to San José for interviews or travel. The main airport, Juan Santamaría, is located in Alajuela, northwest of San José. From there, presuming that it is not gridlocked rush-hour traffic, it is 30-40 minutes by bus on the highway to the Avenida Central, or main street, of the capital. Arriving in San José by bus, I almost always took a taxi to the Lumaca terminal, about a mile and a half away. A taxi ride that distance cost around 2500 *colones* during my fieldwork, roughly \$5. Sometimes I had to argue with taxi drivers who were not inclined to turn on or to reset the *maría*, the meter. Others wanted to take me all the way to Cartago, a ride that would have cost \$30-40. Although Lonely Planet is full of warnings about San José taxi drivers, I never had any major problems, perhaps because I spoke Spanish and knew where I was going (most of the time). I did discover that U.S. tourists are infamous for mistreating car doors by slamming them too hard, and I tried my best to gently close them upon exiting. San José does not have a central bus station, and though a few regional terminals have been built (almost all the Caribbean-bound buses, for example, depart from the same location), the majority of buses either leave from a stop on the street (which can move suddenly) or from a terminal named for the company that owns the route. In this case, the bus route from San José to Cartago, Costa Rica's first capital, is owned by Lumaca; their terminal opened in 2010.

From Lumaca it was another 40 minutes or so to Cartago, up to two hours in rush-hour traffic for a distance of about 25 kilometers. Luckily for someone traveling with a backpack, the San José-Cartago bus stopped half a block from the Orosi bus, and it took a third 40 minute ride, and another roughly \$1 fare, for about 15 kilometers, until I was once again disembarking on Orosi's main street. I include this description to demonstrate that Orosi is both very close to and very far from the capital, that it is easy to reach (because public transportation is readily available, and readily affordable to most) but that doing so requires knowledge of a complex, almost byzantine system of private bus companies regulated by the government, operating on streets that, outside of city centers, do not have names or numbers. I was frequently both astonished and impressed by tourists who managed to get to Orosi by



bus despite not speaking any Spanish, or by those who rented cars and navigated San José's terrifying roundabouts during *la hora pica*, rush hour.

Coming down into the Orosi Valley, one approaches Orosi from the north. The road winds south through the flattened central part of the valley before gently curving east and then north, describing a narrow loop with a paved road on either side of the Reventazón River. On the northeast side, it is possible to exit the Valley through the town of Cachí, heading north and west and up to Paraíso. Alternatively, one can head up and to the northeast in the direction of Turrialba. There are, then, only two entrances to the Valley, both at the north end, and the only vehicle bridge over the river is at the

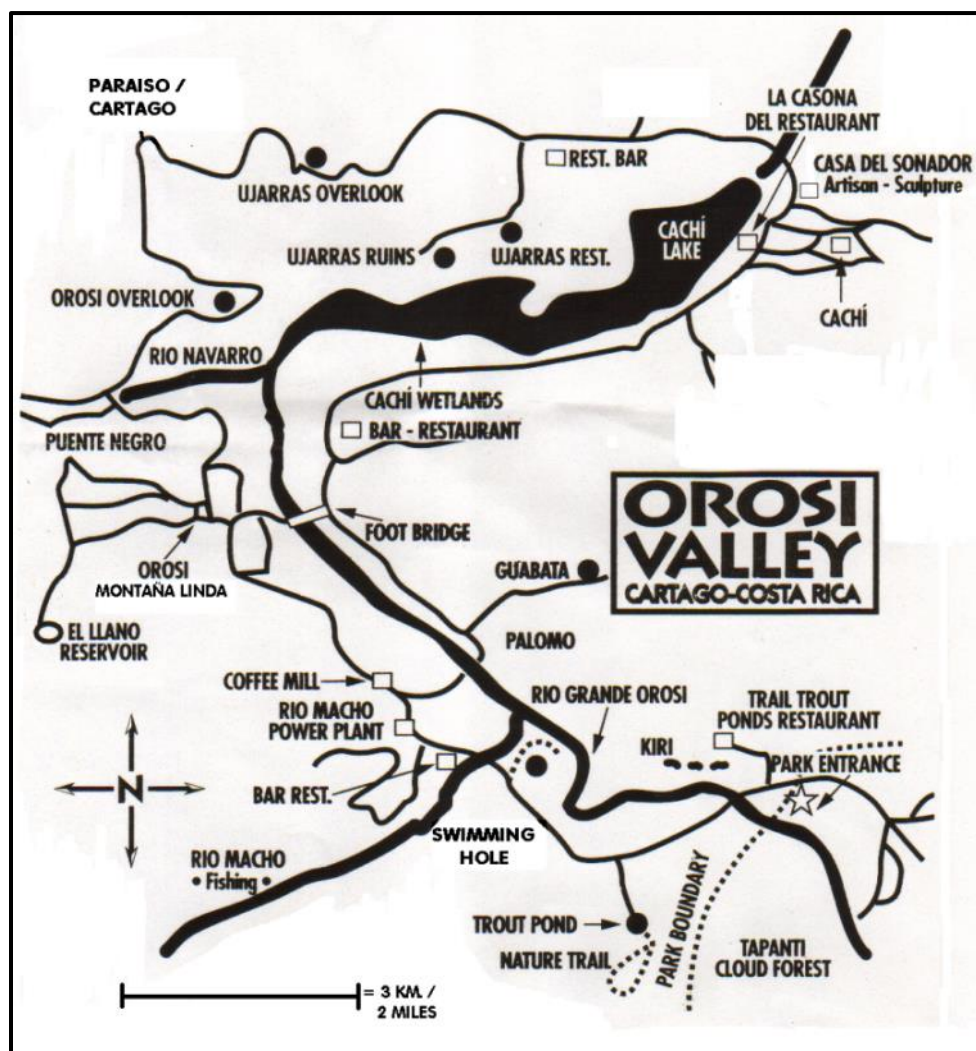


Image 2: Map of the Orosi Valley  
Source: Montaña Linda

southern end. It is too narrow to allow anything larger than a microbus to pass, and even those cross at their own risk. There is a hanging pedestrian bridge that connects Orosi to the hamlets of Altos de Araya and Loaiza, but only foot traffic and bicycles can cross this way. It is possible to enter and exit the Valley on the extreme southeastern side, but this road is unpaved, unmarked, and likely to end in frustration and a broken axle for anyone not in a high-clearance four wheel drive vehicle. It is, therefore, not possible to arrive in Orosi by accident. It is not on the way to anywhere except Tapantí National Park, whose entrance is located about five kilometers south of the vehicle bridge.

The other two sites outside of San José where I conducted research were San Marcos de Tarrazú, in the mountains to the southwest of Orosi, and Hojancha de Guanacaste, located on the Nicoya Peninsula in the far northwest of the country. Hojancha is hot, dry, and located at about 800 meters above sea level, in an area where little coffee can be grown. In contrast San Marcos is cooler and higher than Orosi, and is in the region celebrated for producing the best coffee in the country. With these two sites, I aimed to situate Orosi within the broader context of Costa Rican coffee production, as well as to demonstrate the ways in which the state's reach is geographically limited: the farther one is from San José, the fewer resources available and the fewer alternative employment opportunities outside of agriculture.

### ***Theoretical Orientations***

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This is primarily an ethnography of an object that I anchor in the town of Orosi, Costa Rica. It is an ethnography in which I study ideas about what makes good coffee, and what makes coffee good; the labor that produces it and who is produced by that labor; and the history and movement of coffee as a physical good. Following geographer Julie Guthman and anthropologist Sarah Besky, I take a "food systems perspective" (Besky 2014:3; Guthman 2011:19), in which I look not only at the places and spaces of production and consumption of specialty coffee, but also at the ways in which coffee is made and made meaningful in and in between those spaces. Specialty coffee is what ends up in coffeeshops

and the more expensive bags of whole beans on sale at grocery stores. It is differentiated from conventional coffee – the pre-ground, three-pound-tin stuff that was the only option available in the United States until the 1970s – through a range of practices and preparation methods. I focus on specialty for several reasons. One, the majority of Costa Rica’s coffee ends up in the specialty market, and only that which does not make the grade is sold to conventional purveyors. Two, the practices and discourses by which specialty is differentiated from conventional include a host of ideas about quality, origin, farmer happiness and attention to his or her crop, and rarity that have important ramifications for Costa Rican farmers. As Costa Rica’s economy has diversified away from a reliance on export agriculture towards one that is more service, particularly tourism, oriented, less land is devoted to coffee and fewer farmers work in the fields. Coffee, once the backbone of national identity and of the welfare state, is slipping away in terms of economic and social importance, and for those whose lives were once shaped by coffee’s rhythms, there is nothing that has stepped in to replace it. The welfare state itself has been strained by rapid population growth and more recently, by the implementation of CAFTA in 2007, which has forced the state to divest itself of some of its monopolies and loosened regulations in a number of sectors of the economy.

The specialty industry as a whole is highly aware of the inequalities that exist between purveyors in the global North and farmers in the global South, and has taken steps over the years to work towards justice and awareness. As I will demonstrate in this dissertation, however, the complexity of the ways in which coffee is produced and made sense of in Costa Rica, as elsewhere, means that to frame this inequality as only an economic problem with an economic solution is to miss out on possibilities for change as well as to ignore larger structural challenges faced by farmers (Besky 2014). Besky was writing about Fair Trade tea plantations in Darjeeling, India, but the dangers of ignoring the social context of production hold true for specialty coffee in general and Fair Trade coffee in particular. Specialty also frames producers as suffering from economic inequality, the solution to which is higher

prices and consumer awareness. This awareness is taken to be the vehicle through which higher prices are possible: if consumers simply knew how hard farmers work, and how complicated it is to produce this seemingly simple beverage, they would be willing to pay more for their java.<sup>1</sup> Farmers would earn more, would learn to use sustainable methods on their farms, and everyone and everything would come out ahead of where they are now. Both specialty and Fair Trade operate with the best of intentions, and their concern for farmers and the conditions of production are to be lauded.

The challenge, however, is that many of these intentions have been coopted or misapplied. The relationship between retail price and farmer earnings is not that simple or straightforward, and the techniques employed in the name of consumer awareness are fraught with contradiction. As specialty coffee, once a tiny niche market, has grown in scope and scale, retailers have had to find ways to differentiate their product, to show consumers the reason why their coffee is even more special than that of the shop across the street. This differentiation combines sensory characteristics with ethical concerns: not only does this coffee taste better, but farmers/the environment/women/children/birds fare better when you drink it. Under this logic it is thus the task of specialty coffee purveyors to educate consumers, to teach them to appreciate coffee's nuances, both within the realm of the sensorial (roast, process, preparation, grind, etc.) and within the often overwhelming array of moral-ethical choices and certifications that now pervade the specialty marketplace.

It is within this context that I undertook more than eighteen months of ethnographic research, mainly in Costa Rica but also in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as via participation in specialty coffee conferences, coffee shops, and classes. I wanted to understand how this industry had developed, how its ideas about quality and differentiation had changed over time, and what this meant for Costa Rican farmers. Costa Rica's national identity revolves around the image of the humble *campesino*, the independent, humble yet hard-working farmer who cares for his family and for the land. Coffee is

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the word "java" to mean "coffee" comes from the Indonesian island of Java, a place deeply embedded in the Dutch colonial coffee trade.

credited with fomenting democracy, stability, relative equality, and with transforming a colonial backwater into the ecological tourist paradise that it is today. In the *Gran Área Metropolitana*, the region around the capital of San José, the sons and daughters of Costa Rican farmers hope for white-collar jobs, made possible by higher education paid for with coffee money; the presence of four free universities (open to those who achieve high scores on entrance exams) helps with those aspirations, as do the myriad private universities. These aspirations are no less salient for youth in more rural zones, but they are also much less achievable, for despite its small size, Costa Rica has always been centered around San José: access to resources and political power diminishes with distance from the capital. In the province of Cartago, where Oroquieta is located, Costa Ricans who had not set foot on a farm since their childhoods described themselves as *campesinos*, even though it has been decades since coffee was the primary driver of the economy.

Today, most of the coffee is picked by Nicaraguans, who are often undocumented migrants but who are blamed for almost all the country's ills regardless of their immigration status. The *campesino* as the archetype of Costa identity and hard work is beginning to lose some of its luster, dimmed in part by the turn to Nicaraguan labor as well as the influx of tourism, technology, internet access, and the sense that Costa Rica is really quite close to being part of the "developed" world. Instead of the *campesino* in his hat and rubber boots, the new Costa Rican archetype works at Intel or Amazon, is fluent in English, has traveled to the United States as a tourist, yet comes home every night, or at least every weekend, to his or her family, whose safety, happiness, and security are paramount above all other concerns.

This could be just another story of a country transitioning from an agricultural to a service-based economy, with all the challenges and changes such a move entails. What sets Costa Rica apart, however, is its welfare state apparatus: prior to and during the civil wars, revolutions, and U.S. incursions that rocked its neighbors from the 1960s to the 1990s, Costa Rica eliminated its army and implemented universal social security, healthcare and education, with public ownership of the electrical and

telecommunications utility. Much of the money for these investments, at least initially, came from an export tax on coffee. There was a strong sense that the state, as an institution, could be trusted, that it was acting in the best interests of the people,<sup>2</sup> and that everyone would and should be taken care of. Also unusual for the era was the sense that the United States, even with its individual-first mentality, was a friend of Costa Rica, not an enemy to be placated or avoided as it was elsewhere in the Central American isthmus.

This is, of course, an overly optimistic version of Costa Rica's history, but it is this idea of Costa Rica as a country of peace and a friend of the United States, despite their differences, that pervades contemporary notions of identity and contributes to the sense that Costa Rica is exceptional, the Switzerland of Central America, a country that is only "accidentally" in Central America and that really belongs in the Southern Cone if not in Europe itself. But what happens to that identity when the institutions that support it are dismantled? The welfare state was backed not only in part by coffee money, but by the belief of its people that it was doing its best to provide equal support for everyone. As the country has undergone increasing neoliberalization, starting with a "half-hearted" (Sandbrook, et al. 2007) attempt in the 1980s that provided the groundwork for the implementation of CAFTA in 2009, so too has public faith in its institutions eroded (and not without cause). Services that were once equally free, and perhaps equally inefficient, for all have become tiered: for example, those without money must use the *Caja*, the public health system, while those with more wealth increasingly rely on private healthcare, made possible only because of the public health system's success (Lee 2012).

Many of these changes are due to international pressure, to the need to continue trading with the United States, and to external ideas about the role of government and social safety nets. Yet the decline of coffee has meant more than just an occupational transition for younger generations. Coffee,

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<sup>2</sup> At least of the majority of the people, and particularly those who were physically close to San José. As we will see, indigenous communities, and to a lesser degree the black populations of the Caribbean coast, were almost entirely absent from this vision.

besides funding social welfare projects, was a very real vehicle for forming and then maintaining social structure. Rather than paying migrant workers, entire families would go up into the fields to pick coffee, rotating between fields as the coffee matured. This had the effect of solidifying kinship ties, keeping families within a limited geographical area, and also maintaining the status quo. When the labor force was restricted to the extended family, it was difficult for any one person to achieve upward economic mobility, or to differentiate themselves too strongly from their neighbors – who were also their relatives. Even as members of older generations recounted to me the hardships of days past, they reminisced longingly about being poor *together* – everyone sharing in the hardship, and no one feeling jealous of anyone else. Today, they say, life is easier, but it's also much more about individual accomplishments than it is about sharing and solidarity. As coffee harvesting shifted from a family task to one undertaken by wage workers – Nicaraguan or otherwise – the possibilities for upward mobility, and the sense of shared sacrifice, shifted as well. More educated young adults began working not in the fields but in the cities, where they did not know anyone and where achievement was measured in terms of material acquisition rather than kinship networks. And so too, as Nicaraguans made up an increasingly large share of the population did it additionally become possible to divest oneself from the need to undertake the difficult work of picking coffee, as there was a large underclass available to blame when the social safety net began to fray under the neoliberalization of the economy.

The social system in which coffee made sense is gone, at least in Orosi, and nothing has stepped in to replace it. Those along the commodity chain who seek to improve the livelihoods of coffee farmers and the quality of coffee produced think they are speaking to each other, when more often they seem to talking past one another, usually by either failing to recognize that the social context of production can be just as important as economic incentives, or by not fully understanding that context and how it operates. In order to compete in an increasingly crowded marketplace, buyers are asking farmers to perform care and farming – to demonstrate that their coffee is grown with love and attention – so that

this story can be retold to consumers and passed on as contributing to some intrinsic property of the beans. Yet it has been decades since the majority of Orosian farmers worked full-time in their fields, and they are both unwilling and unable to enact this performance to meet buyers' ideas about how coffee should move from soil to cup, particularly when the price remains so low. Instead, they are abandoning coffee, renting or selling their fields to multinational corporations and absentee foreign landowners, severing their ties to their past and way of being-in-the-world and setting themselves and their families even further adrift from that which had once anchored their identities.

### ***Methodology***

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I relied primarily on participant observation and informal interviews in my research, which was conducted between 2009-2013. I spent two months in Orosi during the summers of 2009 and 2010, returned for a week during a festival in March of 2011, and then lived in Orosi almost continuously from August 2011 through August 2012. I returned for five weeks of follow-up work during the summer of 2013 and then presented my findings in May 2014.

My first introductions came through Montaña Linda, the Spanish school and hostel. This meant that the first people I spoke with were homestay families, Spanish teachers, office managers, and hostel staff – people who were accustomed to tourists. The employees of Montaña Linda also became some of my closest friends, and were the people to whom I turned when I had questions about particular practices, or needed help with my cell phone service. Katty, who left Montaña Linda in 2011 and moved to Minnesota, spent 2009 and 2010 introducing me to her friends and family and ensuring that someone outside the school recognized me when I returned to town. In order to expand this initial circle, I used snowball sampling, asking for recommendations and introductions to other people with whom I should speak. In some cases, the same names of community leaders would be repeated multiple times, but more often it was to someone's cousin or uncle or grandparent that I was directed.



Sara and Toine, in addition to inviting me to meals (cooked by Toine) that lasted late into the night, spent hours sharing their perspectives, acquired during seventeen years of living and raising a son in Orosi. As local business owners, they also accompanied me or sent me as their emissary to meetings on security, tourism, the extraction of materials from the river, and water usage. During the research year, I hired a college student, Kenneth, who lived in Orosi and commuted to San José each day in pursuit of his degree in marketing and communication. Kenneth's family had once hosted students through Montaña Linda, but I met him in a photography class in Cartago. Kenneth's help was invaluable for conducting interviews, particularly about Orosi's past, as he was able to call upon his kin and friend networks and to arrange meetings. Later, we would discuss the patterns we saw, or didn't see, and he would put me in touch with those he thought could offer a different perspective than what had already been presented. Because he was from Orosi and embedded in local networks, Kenneth was also able to secure interviews with figures who would not speak to me without a personal introduction: the police chief, the mayor, and some of the town's business leaders. With the exception of the mayor, who insisted I record our conversation, I relied on taking notes during interviews.

There were a few cases where cold-calling worked, though mainly I relied on friends of friends or Kenneth's contacts. Dr. Iván Molina Jiménez, a history professor at the University of Costa Rica, first agreed to meet with me in July of 2009, and we met several times after that to discuss Costa Rican history, politics, CAFTA, and the country's future. In addition to being a prolific writer who has published at least a dozen books on these topics, Dr. Molina introduced me to IIS and CIHAC, the two institutions at the University where I became an affiliated researcher. IIS, the *Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales* (Social Science Investigation Institute), and CIHAC, the *Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de America Central* (Center for Investigations in Central American History), provided institutional homes and support, as well as access to the National Archives and the university library.

In addition to work in Costa Rica, this is a multi-sited ethnography in which I conducted research on the specialty coffee industry in multiple locations. This included attendance at several conferences. I attended CoffeeFest, a trade show primarily for coffee retailers, in Seattle in 2005 and Chicago in 2007. In 2010, the World Coffee Conference was held in Guatemala City, bringing together high-level industry actors from around the world (along with the very few farmers who could afford to attend). In 2013 and 2014 I attended the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA)'s annual conference in Boston and Seattle, respectively. At both SCAA shows, which had more than 10,000 attendees from around the world, I volunteered in order to earn free registration, working primarily as a Spanish-English translator and at the SCAA store. I spent a week in February of 2014 in Honduras attending the Alliance for Coffee Excellence's intermediate cupping training. We spent two days on coffee farms near Copán, during which I was able to compare Honduran practices with those typical in Costa Rica. Finally, in July of 2014 I attended Barista Nation, a two-day event in Denver intended for baristas and others who were looking for careers in the specialty industry.

I also connected with people across the coffee industry on Twitter and Facebook. Twitter, in particular, is a popular space for sharing coffee news, tips, tricks, and concerns, and I have been able to watch as the same stories are shared in different ways depending on by whom and for what reason they are being tweeted. Participating in these conferences and training sessions not only helped me create a network of people with whom I could share information and ask questions, it allowed me to see the trends and conversations that were present at the highest levels of the industry, and then to see how they did or did not trickle down to baristas and finally to farmers.

Towards the end of research, when I was writing and analyzing my findings, I spent many hours in conversation with Mark Overly, owner of Kaladi Coffee in Denver. Mark and I originally met at the World Coffee Conference in Guatemala and reconnected a few years later when he hosted a cupping (tasting) event at his shop in April 2014. In addition to running the shop and buying all its coffee, Mark

runs a blog called The Coffee Heretic, where he critiques many of the trends in specialty coffee. We drank a lot of his coffee while discussing what could and should be done for farmers, what he was looking for as a buyer, whether Fair Trade was and could be effective, and what the word “quality” really meant.

### ***Language and (Re)Presentation***

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Unless otherwise noted, all the interviews conducted in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras were in Spanish, while those with specialty industry members were in English, usually the first language of both speakers. Though I did not digitally record interviews or conversations, in some cases I was able to get quotations down word for word, or very nearly word for word. These are presented in the text with quotation marks. Those where I recreated the sentiment of the speaker’s meaning, or where I combined multiple conversations for the sake of clarity or anonymity, are written more informally, and do not appear inside quotes. All translations from Spanish, either from books or conversations, are my own; when I felt it was important to include the original Spanish term or phrase, it appears in italics, preceded or followed by the translation. A glossary of acronyms and of Spanish and coffee terms appears in the appendix.

Costa Rica, as will be noted throughout this dissertation, is a safe country. No one I spoke with worried that my words might cause them harm or physical reprisals; the same is true of those in the specialty coffee industry. Unlike anthropologists who work in dangerous areas, my concerns with anonymity are less that they will come to physical harm and more that I have shared more than, in hindsight, they may have wished. I have not hidden the names of the towns where I did research, though in many cases I have smudged the details of individuals with whom I spoke. In some cases this involves the use of pseudonyms; in others I merged two people and presented them as one, or split one person’s opinions across several names. In certain cases, anonymity was either impossible or unnecessary, as in the case of public figures (including figures considered public within the coffee

industry or within Orosi), or where the person is already publicly (e.g., digitally) connected with a given opinion. I have opted to not denote when pseudonyms are in use in order to further protect the identities of the many people who were kind enough to speak and share their opinions with me. I hope that those who are mentioned here will see themselves fairly represented, even if they do not necessarily agree with my conclusions about their words or those of others. All analyses, errors, omissions, and conclusions are my own.

### ***Chapter Organization***

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This dissertation examines the rise and fall of the coffee welfare state in Costa Rica alongside the more recent rise of specialty coffee in the Global North. In Chapter One, I lay out Costa Rica's history as a less-populated region prior to the arrival of the Spanish, to a backwater under Spanish colonial rule, and then as an independent nation starved for an export product that could survive the several months' journey to Europe or the United States. Coffee, first exported in 1820, fit that need, and from the beginning was under state control. Coffee also provided the funds and the impetus to build roads, ports, and bridges, and taxes on its export funded the nascent welfare state. With a very small army and little room to gain wealth and influence, the country remained relatively egalitarian until the 1980s, and its people came to look to the state for support, rather than to fear it as happened elsewhere in the isthmus.

In the second chapter, I narrow the broader history of Costa Rica to look at Orosi's history as a rural agricultural town where, according to my interlocutors, there truly was egalitarianism – everyone was equally poor. Coffee was the predominant cash crop, grown alongside subsistence foods and in between fields that supported dairy cows and horse pastures. The rural, impoverished nature of the town changed in the 1960s, when the national electricity company built a hydroelectric power plant at one end of the valley and a dam (also hydroelectric) at the other end. These projects required a large labor force and offered generous government benefits: like coffee before them, the arrival of the

electric company provided the impetus to build or improve roads and bridges and to build and staff schools. It also allowed Orosians to work for the electric company while continuing to grow coffee, which was the backbone of social and family life. It created and cemented bonds of mutual obligation and provided the money needed to celebrate Christmas. Since coffee was so closely tied to the welfare state and all that made Costa Rica exceptional, coffee farmers and their families were proud of this work and their contributions both to their community and to the nation more broadly.

In the third chapter, I move from Orosi to the world of international coffee, looking at coffee's history and its rise from the drink of elites to a mass-produced, mass-marketed beverage that many in the United States think of as central to their ability to function each day. Since the late 1970s, the niche market known as specialty has brought consumption back to the purview of elites, in this case those who are willing and able to taste distinction, who see mass-produced coffee as antithetical to their work and to their preferences. I argue that despite their claims to have decommodified coffee by focusing on production and origin, boutique specialty purveyors have instead fetishized it far beyond that of the conventional coffee against which they see themselves working. Conventional coffee can carry a number of meanings and values: perhaps because of its ubiquity it is part of family gatherings, rituals, and cultural identities. Both specialty and conventional offer caffeine and an excuse, if not a reason, for bringing people together. For specialty to justify its increased exchange value, then, there must be something else at work, something else that specialty offers that conventional can or does not. That argument hinges on the idea that the *experience* of specialty is entirely different from that of Folgers, that the taste, the attention to preparation and to origin, and the quality of social interaction are all superior to that offered by conventional. At the same time, conventional is necessary to the specialty enterprise, for without it, there would be nothing bad with which to contrast the good.

In the fourth chapter, I examine some of the ways in which specialty coffee has gone from being a beverage of mass consumption to once again belonging to the purview of elites. In this case, however,

elites are those who learn to taste distinction and to demonstrate the right preferences. I describe the cupping (tasting) process and the ways in which preference and distinction are shaped, as well as the role played by narrative and storytelling. I then discuss the ways in which farming and farmers have been managed, starting with the Green Revolution of the 1960s and moving through the “return to nature” programs of more recent decades. In this chapter, I present the limited scientific research that connects various interventions to quality in the cup. I argue that because so much of what constitutes quality and distinction exists in the ephemeral world of narrative, the management of farmers has become increasingly arbitrary, relying on anecdotes and Northern visions of the idyllic pastoral rather than replicable research.

The fifth chapter returns to Costa Rica following a discussion of Fair Trade and its reliance on the idyllic image of the smiling farmer, as well as its narratives of traceability and connection, to sell a more “just” product. I look at the ways in which labor divisions in the Costa Rican coffee industry in many ways replicated Fair Trade ideals by viewing production as a partnership between farmer and miller, as well as how current methods of transforming coffee from cherry to dry seed reinforce a middle ground when it comes to quality. I then examine the role of ICAFE, the Costa Rican Coffee Institute, in defining and then maintaining quality across the country, and the challenges that the entire industry faces in physically moving coffee from origin to the point of consumption. I end the chapter with studies in San Marcos de Tarrazú, one of Costa Rica’s preeminent growing regions, and Hojancha de Guanacaste, where conditions for production are much more difficult. I do so to demonstrate that one-size-fits-all models such as Fair Trade, and narratives that rely exclusively on creating value through difference, miss opportunities to support farmers and perhaps create real change.

In the sixth and final chapter, I shift the discussion from San Marcos and Hojancha back to Orosi, where farmers are being told by buyers that they are “no longer living a coffee life” – that is, they are not sufficiently performing the work of care and attention that is required for these narratives of value

and differentiation. The fetishized notions of place, labor, and value that run through purveyor ideas of what specialty coffee should be are in direct contradiction to Orosian ideals of the farmer as self-employed and independent, sharing their work with mills rather than laboring for them. At the same time, the implementation of CAFTA has accelerated local impressions that the state is withdrawing from everyday life, and that it will no longer provide the support once taken for granted. Without coffee or the state, the only remaining anchoring point for identity and meaning is the family, so that Orosians are focusing inward at a time when families are being pulled apart by the exigencies of travel for work or study, and when the community is facing new challenges caused by the state's withdrawal.

## Chapter One: Origins of the Coffee State

“If democracy and rural egalitarianism are the essence of Costa Rica and coffee is the source of both, then...Costa Rica is coffee” (Paige 1997:225). For more than a century, coffee was the “country’s salvation” (Hall 1976:151), and while its role and importance has decreased, coffee is still today the heart of national identity, the backbone of the welfare state, and according to many Costa Ricans, the source, and most visible symbol, of Costa Rican exceptionalism. Even the painted oxcarts used to transport coffee to the coasts<sup>3</sup> on the first rough roads have become a national icon, and in 2005 they were declared an Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (Ministerio de Cultura y Juventud 2013). How did a country that was a backwater under the Spanish become so dependent on coffee for its economy and sense of self, and what implications does that dependence have for contemporary Costa Ricans?

This chapter introduces the Costa Rican coffee state, from its origins as a backwater under Spanish rule to the effects of this abandonment on access to land and resources. It examines the ways in which early state control over the coffee industry provided the backbone for the development of the welfare state, as well as for a national identity that revolved around ideas of interdependence and self-determination. I then contrast that experience with other coffee states, arguing that the ways in which coffee is produced are directly tied to local and national histories, and that these histories then directly impact the opportunities available to farmers in the contemporary marketplace. That is, in the regions of Costa Rica where the state has historically had a strong presence, farmers have been able to do relatively well in coffee production, while in areas where the state has been weaker, such as Hojancha de Guanacaste, or in Guatemala and Papua New Guinea, farmers have struggled to get by. As we will see

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<sup>3</sup> The oxcarts were also used in the 1820s and 1830s to depulp coffee cherries, making Costa Rica the first country to do so. It was a crude, but effective, method of removing the cherry that protects the seed (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:77). This fact, however, goes unmentioned in both the UNESCO report and in conversations with Costa Ricans about oxcarts.



throughout this dissertation, the role of the state is frequently elided or ignored by coffee industry members. In specialty narratives farmers are often treated as a homogenous block, and solutions to the problems of poverty and access to markets are to be found within individual actions, rather than by looking to states or long histories of colonialism and imperialism.

### ***Coffee Processing: From Seed to Cup***

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Before examining the connections between coffee and the rise of the Costa Rican welfare state, I first explain the basics of coffee production and processing, and provide a comparison between the methods utilized in Costa Rica and those common in other countries. A crop that comes from the same genetic root and ends up as the same cup of liquid coffee can be processed in several different ways, to say nothing of the differing social and economic conditions under which it was produced. These differences have important ramifications for farmers, national development, importers, roasters, retailers, and finally consumers, though they are unevenly recognized, understood, and given importance across these groups.

The legend of coffee starts with an Ethiopian or, less likely, a Yemeni goat herder by the name of Kaldi, who noticed that his goats became especially frisky after eating the cherries of a particular tree. Kaldi then tried the cherries, and so coffee cultivation was born, sometime around the eighth or ninth century. Coffee soon spread to Persia, Turkey, Egypt, and North Africa; it was subsequently praised, banned, drunk in secret, legalized, cited as a source of sedition and immoral activity, and finally became grounds for divorce in Turkey if a woman's husband did not provide enough of it to suit her<sup>4</sup> (Pendergrast 1999:4-7; Rice 1999). Starting around the 1500s coffeehouses appeared across Europe, in some cases displacing bars and pubs. During the U.S. Revolutionary War, there was a huge upswing in the number of coffeehouses, as drinking coffee, rather than tea, became part of the anti-British movement.

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<sup>4</sup> Women were not allowed in coffeeshops, so men had to bring it home to them.

Despite the feel-good connections between coffee and intellectual debate, however, coffee can only grow in what is known as the “bean belt,” the region around the Equator between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. This geographical location provides the consistent daylight – both in terms of the angles of the sun and the amount of time it spends in the sky – as well as, at altitude, the mild climate and seasonal winds needed to grow coffee. I have yet to hear of commercially viable greenhouse coffee, though there are a few stories of small-scale production, and the only place in the sociopolitically and economically powerful Global North where coffee can grow is Hawai’i. Otherwise, it is grown only in the global South, with all the colonial inheritance and trade inequality that implies. Indeed, coffee’s roots are mainly in plantations, where it was often consumed with sugar to provide necessary calories and energy for enslaved or nearly-enslaved workers. The case of Costa Rica demonstrates that slavery was not a necessity for coffee production, but coffee’s labor requirements certainly lent themselves to management through coercion (Mintz 1985; Pendergrast 1999; Wolf and Mintz 1975). In fact, the contemporary Fair Trade movement has its roots in the writings of a Dutch colonial official who was so aghast at the conditions under which Javanese coffee workers were laboring that he wrote, under a pen name, a book condemning colonial practices, particularly with respect to coffee production (Multatuli 1987[1860]).

It took coffee seeds some time to spread out from Ethiopia and Yemen – the history books are full of stories of intrigue, smuggling, and a debate over whether a single seedling that survived the ocean journey to Martinique is the source of all Latin American and Caribbean coffee – but however it got to where it was going, coffee offered new opportunities and unique challenges compared to other crops. Regardless of whether it grows on a plantation or a small family farm, where coffee most differs is in its permanence: it takes three to five years for a bush to reach maturity and bear fruit,<sup>5</sup> so it cannot be rotated with other crops. This is true for both Arabica and robusta coffees: Arabica is often known as “quality” or “specialty” coffee and ends up in coffeeshops and whole-bean displays at grocery stores. Robusta, the more “robust” species, becomes, for example, Maxwell House, or Nescafé, or other instant and preground coffees, and is sometimes mixed with Arabica to meet certain flavor characteristics.



**Image 3: Coffee fields rise up on the hills just south of the Orosi town center**

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<sup>5</sup> Though some of the contemporary work with hybrids and/or genetically modified coffee has been to reduce this time; see chapters 3 and 4.

I focus in this dissertation on Arabica production, which has much more demanding geographical and sensorial requirements than robusta; it is also illegal to grow robusta in Costa Rica. Arabica requires altitude, usually at least 1000 meters above sea level. Because it grows best in volcanic soil, it is frequently planted on hillsides, particularly in mountainous Central America. These hillsides are often steep and in many cases unsuited for other crops; the density of planting varies with time, space, and varietal, but they are usually at least 1.25 meters apart from one another, and in some cases up to 2. This gives the plants room to “breathe,” in the words of one interlocutor, for their roots to grow (the roots reach the same radius as the plant’s unpruned branches), for sunlight to reach the lower branches, and for farmers to move between them without damaging cherries.

During the year, coffee needs occasional attention, the timing and content of which is vociferously debated, but which includes planting new seedlings, pruning and weeding the existing bushes, and fertilization and the application of pesticides and herbicides. In Latin America, the coffee tree is pruned to prevent it from reaching a height of more than six to ten feet, as otherwise the uppermost berries would be impossible to reach without a ladder or rope.<sup>6</sup> As we will see in the fourth chapter, there are a number of debates about shade coverage, with some arguing that not only do shade trees provide habitat for migratory birds and offer a greater variety of crops to be interspersed with coffee, but they also help fix nutrients in the soil that coffee removes, and vice versa (Greenberg, et al. 1997; Perfecto, et al. 1996; Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC) 2003). Others with whom I have spoken argue that too much shade can encourage the growth of mold and fungus, limit the space available to plant the much more profitable coffee, and makes harvesting more difficult (Hall 1976; McCook 2009; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010). Still others agree that shade *is* necessary, but

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<sup>6</sup> The use of ladders or ropes to reach higher branches is more common in areas without selective harvesting, that is, in places where the coffee is completely stripped of its berries regardless of their maturity. The additional cherries gained by allowing the coffee to grow taller are not considered to be worth the effort of reaching them in places (like Costa Rica) where selective harvesting requires pickers to pass through an area three or four or five times.

not the *kind* of shade that organizations such as the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC), which offers the “Shade Grown” certification, prefer; they want to intercrop with trees that are fast-growing and useful for firewood or other projects, while the SMBC looks for trees that are known resting spots for birds.

In Costa Rica the coffee cycle begins in the spring, around April or May, when small white flowers appear on the branches. A few months later, the flowers have formed green cherries, which continue darkening towards red and growing in volume. Depending on the altitude, the cherries are ready to harvest between September and March, with any given region usually experiencing a two-month harvest period. What used to be highly consistent and predictable has, however, grown much more irregular in the past several years, as climate change has interrupted both the rainy and dry seasons and lengthened the time over which beans will ripen. Even when they were more predictable than today, however, all the cherries never ripened at once, which meant that workers must make several passes through a given field in order to only collect the ripe cherries. Because of both this



**Image 4: Unevenly ripened coffee, Orosi**

irregular ripening period and the steepness of the hillsides, Arabica harvesting has to my knowledge not been mechanized.

Rather than using machinery, which runs the risk of dropping cherries before they are ripe, workers must pass through each plot several times. The ripe cherries are harvested by hand into baskets, known in Costa Rica as *cajuelas*, and then brought to a mill for processing. In Costa Rica, this usually means that the farmer collects all the coffee in the back of his pickup truck, or the back of a truck belonging to the mill, and then brings it either to a mill or to one of many *recolectores*, collection stations, scattered across the area. In either case the coffee is weighed, and once the last of the harvest is in, the farmer's work is done until it is time to prune and fertilize and weed again. Depending on the relationship the farmer has with the mill, he (and the farmer is almost always male) may receive a small payment upon the *entrega*, or handing over, of his raw cherries. More frequently, he receives short-term loans throughout the year to cover production costs and is paid (minus the loan) at the end of the harvest season, or when the coffee is finally sold and exported out of the country.

Once the coffee has been *entregado*, handed in, it is the mill's task to turn the raw cherries into a shelf-stable product. In Costa Rica the process is known as "wet milling" and is highly mechanized, though the kind of technology used varies greatly across the country depending on the resources of the mill. First, the cherries are sorted, usually by floating them in a large tank that sits directly behind the receiving station. Low-quality cherries float, while the more dense cherries sink to the bottom. Once sorted, the coffee seeds are stripped from the outer pulp, usually by passing through a device that looks like two cheese graters placed closely together. The pulp may be frequently recycled into organic fertilizer or, more recently, into jams and jellies. After the pulp has been removed, the seeds are coated in a sticky layer called the *miel*, or honey. They are then soaked in large tanks for 24-48 hours to remove

the *miel*. Once the *miel* has been removed, two seeds or beans remain.<sup>7</sup> From there vacuum tubes bring the different quality seeds to different parts of the mill, where they will be processed either for export or domestic consumption. These are again sorted by size and weight, often by a slightly-tilted board which is either shaken side to side or bounced up and down by machinery. As with the flotation phase, the heavier, more prized beans are sorted out from those that are a smaller size and thus ostensibly lower in quality.<sup>8</sup>

After sorting, the beans are dried. Historically, this process would take place in the sun, with the beans spread out on patios, roofs, or even along the road. Every few hours, someone would walk through the beans with a rake, turning them over to ensure that they dried completely.<sup>9</sup> Most of the mills in Costa Rica, however, have worked to overcome the vagaries of the dry season by installing *guardiolas*, large drying tumblers into which the beans are placed and then heated as they rotate. Though critics complain that the *guardiola* does not result in the same flavors as sun-drying the coffee, this machinery allows mill workers to take precise measurements of moisture content and to end the drying when the coffee beans contain precisely 10.5% moisture. Some mills use a mixture of sun and machine-dried coffee to try to mimic the flavors of fully sun-dried while mitigating the effects of rain and moisture. At that point, the beans, now called parchment coffee, green coffee, or *café en oro*, gold(en) coffee, can be stored in burlap sacks for a year or more in warehouses that are sometimes mechanically climate-controlled and in other cases rely on the relative consistency of Costa Rican temperatures to maintain the proper conditions.

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<sup>7</sup> There are some cherries which produce only a single seed or bean, known as “peaberries.” These beans are sometimes prized as they have all of the caffeine and flavor of two individual seeds combined into one bean. 100% Peaberry coffee is usually more expensive because of this. Others feel that peaberries are less desirable because their different shape and size makes them difficult to roast properly.

<sup>8</sup> In countries with lower levels of investment in and access to technology, this process is done by hand.

<sup>9</sup> One mill that I visited in Panama had built a number of wooden racks crossed with mesh on which to place the beans, to improve the air flow and minimize must or mold. These racks could be moved around to catch or avoid the sun, a big improvement over mechanization or large undifferentiated piles on a patio. Though raised wooden beds are becoming more common, these were the only ones I have seen that were not permanently fixed in place. This kind of technology is only possible at a small mill with low volume, and one interested in doing things in an unusual fashion. For example, the owner roasted his own beans using a roaster made out of Land Rover parts.

Parchment coffee is then shipped to the rest of the world in containers via the port in Limón, a process that in Costa Rica is heavily surveilled and regulated by ICAFE, the National Coffee Institute. Exporters – usually transnational corporations who act as middlemen between producers and roasters – must submit paperwork with the lot numbers of each bag, which is checked upon arrival in Limón and again before the container is sealed for departure on a ship. When the coffee containers arrive at their destination, the containers are placed onto tractor-trailers for delivery to a roaster, who then processes the coffee once again and packages it for consumption either by individual consumers or at a coffeeshop.

It is in the processing of coffee that countries most differ, with important ramifications not only for social structure but also for coffee quality and control (see chapters 4 and 5). In countries like Papua New Guinea, farmers both grow and process their own coffee, selling an export-ready product to traders (West 2012). They do this using a process called dry milling or dry processing, where the beans are dried with the cherry still intact; the cherries are then removed by hand or by a version of the cheese grater that separates them from what are now husks. This decidedly lower-tech method produces coffees with very different flavor profiles that are currently in vogue among some specialty purveyors. The downside is that it has a tendency to lead to “musty” or moldy coffee because farmers are less consistent about drying times and often have access to inadequate storage facilities; that is, they are not climate-controlled, which increases the possibility of mold. They certainly do not have the \$800 device that looks like a UPC scanner and which can indicate the moisture content of their beans. The result is that coffee production relies much more heavily on acquired knowledge and a bit of environmental luck, rather than the mechanization and exactitude now present in Costa Rican production (West 2010; 2012).

While Guatemalan mills look similar to Costa Rica’s, the drastically differing social conditions have led to a distinct context for production and farmer agency. Unlike in Costa Rica, large *fincas* – farms – run by foreign landowners have been the norm since colonial times, and the few independent farmers



who remain do so on fragmented plots that are located far from roads. In San Pedro la Laguna, where I conducted research in 2007, few farmers had contracts with the local mills. Instead of waiting for the mill to send a truck and then weighing their coffee on a scale that had been certified by ANACAFE, the Guatemalan National Coffee Association, as would happen in Costa Rica, these farmers were at the mercy of *coyotes*<sup>10</sup> who come around at the end of the day and buy raw coffee cherries for the lowest price the farmer will accept. This context might be changing as more Guatemalans gain access to cell phones and therefore, more accurate pricing information, but given that coffee starts to ferment within 24 hours after harvesting, after which wet mills will no longer accept it, they have little room to negotiate. Farmers who organize into cooperatives frequently fare better, economically, than their independent counterparts (Lyon 2010; Lyon and Moberg 2010), but even those with contracts and guaranteed prices will turn to *coyotes* – in times of desperation; the *coyotes* pay cash, so there is no waiting for processing and export. In Costa Rica, very few farmers are also millers, but the very different social conditions under which they labor means that they are rarely at such a disadvantage as their Guatemalan counterparts.

### ***Costa Rica at the End of Empire***

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How did coffee arrive in Costa Rica, and why was it so critical for the country's development after independence? In the following sections, I lay out the major events that made it possible, even necessary for coffee to become so important, and explain the ways in which Costa Rica's backwater status impacted the development of its labor force.

Costa Rica was the least densely populated of what is now Central America when Cristóbal Colón<sup>11</sup> first arrived at the Caribbean port of Limón in 1502. Although Costa Rica had a relatively small permanent indigenous population, there was a great deal of migration through the zone, as people

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<sup>10</sup> This word, which means the same in Spanish as in English, is also used to describe the men (and very rarely women) who take undocumented migrants across the border into the U.S. for a steep fee. The image is one of people who prey on the weak and desperate.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Columbus. The *colón* is now the name of Costa Rica's currency.

traversed it while trading between the Andean kingdoms to the south and the Maya and Aztec empires to the north. The signs of wealth this trade exhibited – jewelry, precious stones, and the like – led the initial conquerors to far overestimate the amount of mineral wealth available for extraction in the area, and to depart in disappointment for richer lands shortly thereafter (Booth 1998:33; MARCO 2011). Indeed, the Spanish “soon discovered that except for a quickly exhausted alluvial deposit and the jewelry acquired through trade, the area had no gold. The name nevertheless stuck, giving the mineral-poor country its great national joke – that it should have been called instead “*Costa Pobre*” (Poor Coast, as opposed to ‘Rich Coast’)” (Booth 1998:33).

Given the Central American isthmus’ vast size and rather mountainous terrain, and the wide variations in both local populations and in colonist desires, the Spanish reorganization of indigenous labor during the colonial period took many forms. In general, regions on the margins of local rule sometimes managed to maintain their traditional forms of agricultural production and to escape much of the land tenure and labor rearrangement schemes, while others were almost entirely refigured to meet colonial demands (Whitmore and Turner 1992:416 - 418). What is now Costa Rica, especially the Central Valley that is the focus of this study, was mainly ignored by the Spanish for the first sixty years of Conquest and was considered a backwater thereafter; to be posted to Costa Rica as a government official was, if not a punishment, certainly not a move that put one on the path to upward mobility (Bakewell 2004; Booth 1998; Booth, et al. 2006; Burns 1980; Clarence-Smith and Topik 2003; MacLeod 1973; MARCO 2011; Patch 1994). Patch’s (1994) research into colonial documents reveals that despite comparatively high rates of pay, it was difficult to attract colonial officials to the region, so isolated and “backwards” was it considered. This isolation and lack of attention from the Spanish colonial government would prove instrumental in creating a Costa Rica that, while far from the perfectly equitable paradise depicted in national myth, was certainly more egalitarian than its neighbors.

Unlike in Guatemala, where the Spaniards arriving in 1524 found a politically fragmented polity with dozens of languages spoken and hundreds of groups jockeying for resources, 1560s Costa Rica must have appeared to the Spanish as devoid of people (Booth, et al. 2006; Lentner 1993; MacLeod 1973; Pérez Brignoli 1989; Scott 1998; Wortman 1982). Ferrero argues that this emptiness is due in part to lower population density and in part to the fact that pre-Columbian Costa Rica was much more fragmented and much less organized across the region than its northern neighbors. This did not, however, translate into the contemporary Costa Rican notion that hierarchies and social complexity did not exist prior to the arrival of the Spanish, or indicate that the country has always been homogenous, equal, and peaceful (Ferrero 2000). What, precisely, pre- and immediately post-Columbian populations looked like is still a matter of speculation, but certainly they were smaller and of less concern to the Spanish at the time of Conquest than those elsewhere in Central America. Whatever the conditions were prior to 1502, by the time the *conquistadores* returned in the 1560s, many of the indigenous inhabitants had been killed by disease, and the decimated populations fled to remote mountainous regions, where many remain to this day (Bakewell 2004; Handy 1984; Harrison and Turner 1978; MacLeod 1973; 2001; Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007; Patch 2000; Pérez Brignoli 1989; Whitmore and Turner 1992).

Costa Rica included the Province of Costa Rica and the Corregimiento de Nicoya in the northwest, both part of the Kingdom of Guatemala, which had autonomy from the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico) and which maintained that autonomy throughout the colonial period (Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:21). Local government officials tried to break the region away from Guatemala in order to join the Audiencia of Panama, where the treasures of the Incas were brought to be shipped back to Spain. Not only was Panama significantly closer and easier to access than Guatemala, but officials felt that the wealth through trade that the region had enjoyed prior to the arrival of the Spanish could thus

be regained, for both the colony and for themselves. This movement was never successful, however, and Costa Rica remained tied to faraway Antigua, Guatemala (Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:27).

The Spanish were never able to build a secure, continuous land link to Guatemala, so for colonial residents the oceans were the only ready means of transport of goods and people to the capital and then to Europe. The heat, humidity, insects, and diseases of the coasts made them inhospitable places, so despite the lack of roads connecting it to their only reliable transportation network, Costa Rica's principle settlement was located in the Central Valley, far from water, where the land was most fertile and the climate mild. The difficulty in getting from the Central Valley to the ocean would prove to be a strong barrier in developing an export economy, and it would not be until the introduction of coffee in the late 1700s or early 1800s that such an economy *could* develop (Hall 1976; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010).

Due to this isolation and the lack of forced labor available to the conquerors, as very few indigenous peoples remained in areas claimed by the Spanish, the national myth of Costa Rica as a "*demoperfectocracia*," or perfect democracy (Molina Jiménez 2005; 2008a) developed. The idea that the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of complete egalitarianism, democratic participation, and economic equality was referred to ironically as a "*demoperfectocracia*" by writer Yolanda Oreamuno in 1939, and later passed into national myth without this ironic subtlety. Oreamuno wrote that "although the President walks the streets without guards, shakes hands with any anonymous citizen, and gives daily reports to the newspapers, without which the papers would be obliged to have special editions...we do not have and have never had a perfect democracy"<sup>12</sup> (Molina Jiménez 2008d).

In its non-ironic retelling, the myth depicts the colonial and early post-independence period as a time of egalitarian non-differentiation due to wealth and social class. In this narrative, land was readily

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<sup>12</sup> "*Aunque el Presidente se pasea sin guardia por las calles, da la mano a cualquier ciudadano anónimo, y concede reportajes a los periódicos todos los días, sin que por ello los periódicos se vean obligados a hacer tirajes especiales...democracia perfecta no tenemos ni hemos tenido nunca.*"

available to anyone willing to work it, and a sort of rugged individualism combined with tolerance for one's neighbors was necessary in order to survive (Booth 1998; Edelman 1994; 2008; Longley 1997; Paige 1997). Earlier historians were more likely to feed into this myth, discounting the number of indigenous peoples present during Conquest, overstating the ease of access to land, and failing to see the hierarchies and social divisions present from the beginning (e.g. Seligson 1980; Shaw 1976; Wortman 1982). Two notable exceptions to this mythologizing tendency were Gudmundson (1986) and Molina Jiménez (1988; 1991), who pointed out that "the colonial regime implied a series of regulations that guaranteed unequal access" (Gudmundson and Lindo-Fuentes 1995:14) to the factors of production: capital, land, labor, and entrepreneurship. While these inequalities were certainly present, nonetheless the relative abundance of land led to a different system of land tenure than that practiced elsewhere under the Spanish. The socioeconomic role of systems such as the *hacienda* and the *encomienda*<sup>13</sup> were not about who could control land, but rather about who could first acquire and then organize capital and labor (Gudmundson and Lindo-Fuentes 1995:14). In Costa Rica, the distinctions that separated elites from everyone else were mild at first, but grew with time.

Those who were rich in Costa Rica at the time would have been seen as middle-class, if not poor, elsewhere in the Spanish empire. The result was a system of sociopolitical organization in which there was little geographic separation between rich and poor; economic necessity meant that elites could not barricade themselves in manor houses, nor did they need to surround themselves with armies to protect themselves from exploited workers and slaves (Bourgois 1989; Edelman 1999; Low 2000; Molina Jiménez 1988). The fewer than 100 elites who appear in the historical record appear to have been the

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<sup>13</sup> The *encomienda* system, implemented in 1541, granted land and control over indigenous labor to colonists, and created a system in which wealth was based not directly on the control of resources such as land or exports, but rather more fundamentally on control of the human resources that had been appropriated and exploited to work the land and produce the exports (Gudmundson and Lindo-Fuentes 1995; Lovell 1983; Lutz 1994; MacLeod 1973). The assignment of indigenous laborers to *encomiendas*, and the granting of the *encomiendas* themselves, often led to jealousy, contestation, and a route to political power, if one were savvy enough to navigate the complex politics that surrounded *encomienda* distribution (Hall and Pérez Brignoli 2003; Patch 1994, 2000); the system was much less fully developed in labor-poor Costa Rica and Panama.

descendants of Spanish merchants who moved to the colony in the 1500s, and it was not until the late 1800s that others, mainly foreigners, were able to join this group (Hall 1976:51). Beyond the dearth of economic opportunities, Costa Rica was also isolated from Catholic Church power centers, and the lack of need for a military presence to protect early Costa Ricans from enslaved indigenous populations stymied the growth of a military. Longley (1997:5) argues that this distinct form of “colonial experience implanted into the country’s political culture an aversion to centralized government and an emphasis on negotiation and consensus over conflict.” In fact, this aversion to conflict runs so deep that the military was abolished entirely in 1948<sup>14</sup>, further contributing to the myth of demoperfectocracy and giving rise to the idea of Costa Rica as *el país de la paz* (Booth 1998:34-35, Longley 1997:5), the country of peace.

The lack of “repressive and divisive Spanish colonial institutions” (Longley 1997:2) due to the region’s isolation and dearth of both resources and populations to exploit were foundational for creating the country’s democratic government after independence: there were no mines from which to extract wealth, no slave populations to oversee, and until independence the country had no export economy to speak of. However, because labor was in short supply, elites could not simply retire to their *fincas*, or large farms, and demand profitability at the expense of peonage workers: they too had to work the land, or at least to be hands-on in its management. What concentrations of power did exist came through control of the coffee industry, although even then the gap between elite and peasant was relatively small.

### ***The Rise of Coffee***

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Costa Rica’s *demoperfectocracia* and its sense of self as a nation superior to its neighbors had inauspicious beginnings: in 1821, having had independence “thrust” upon it by Mexico (Longley

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<sup>14</sup> An aversion to armed conflict was not the only reason for disbanding the military; politicians also saw great benefit in removing their most likely source of competition for power, particularly given the ongoing military coups in Honduras and Guatemala.

1997:5),<sup>15</sup> Costa Rica was “not so much a country as it was a territory ruled by four affiliated but rival towns [in the Central Valley]: [the original capital of] Cartago, Heredia, San José, and Alajuela” (Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:52). Yet the frequent coups d’état that shook the new republic were relatively bloodless. There was an eight-day civil war in 1821, during which the towns of San José and Alajuela fought against Cartago and Heredia over whether or not to annex Costa Rica to Mexico, that is, essentially over whether they should refuse independence. San José leaders, who fought for independence, won the battle; once they had done so, they cut the size of their armed forces, closed garrisons, and forced the military to subordinate itself to political authorities (Holden 2004:97). Although militarism and *caudillismo* – authoritarian populist leadership – did not end, Holden (2004:97) writes that the move “was an early sign of a long and uneven trend away from the habitual violence of Costa Rica’s sister republics.”

In a sign of better, or at least more stable, things to come, Holden (2004:98), Longley (1997:6), and Gudmundson (1986:4) argue that the mostly peaceful, if nondemocratic transitions that characterized the 19th century were due to apathy and disinterest on the part of the electorate as well as to shifting business alliances, rather than specific ideological competition over how to rule and control resources. Again, Costa Rica distinguished itself from its neighbors: “From 1824 through 1842, Costa Rica experienced only five battles with an estimated total of 144 casualties, the lowest in the region by a large margin” (Williams 1994:204). Costa Rica’s military had never achieved the size nor stature of the military in Guatemala, since there were very few “natives” to forcibly control, and little ability for the impoverished colony and then newly independent state to pay military salaries. This meant that it was easier, and more lucrative, for those who were not born into the ruling class to gain power and social standing through achievements in agriculture and exports than through military

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<sup>15</sup> Mexico had fought for independence from Spain since 1810. Costa Rica was so uninvolved in the battles for separation that it took a month for the news to arrive from Guatemala that it was no longer a colony. Costa Ricans will sometimes point to this as an excuse for their habitual lateness; if their country had been a month late to its own independence celebration, how could they be expected to show up on time for meetings?

prowess (Aguilera Peralta 1983; Handy 1984; 2002; McCreery 1994; Schirmer 1998; Yashar 1997). Moreover, the growth of a bureaucratic or ruling elite was itself limited by the abundance of agricultural opportunities; it was difficult to obtain the capital needed to rise above one's neighbors when almost anyone was able to obtain land and grow crops (Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:55). Given the difficulties in reaching the sea, until 1840 there was almost no commercial production. Until coffee, tobacco was one of the few crops that had the potential to create a capitalist class, but while it was grown until 1905, it was only exported to other colonies between 1788 and 1792 because its quality was so poor and the difficulties in transporting it were so great (Hall 1976:29).

In this context – isolated, rural, poor, and with a surplus of land and a dearth of labor – coffee might have seemed like the best thing ever to happen to Costa Rica. Certainly the lack of development of political and social institutions under the Spanish meant that the country had a relatively clean slate after independence, though that did not mean the transition to independence and an export economy was an easy one. Though like the rest of Central America Costa Rica gained independence in 1821, the short-lived Central American Federation (1823-1838) and the occupation of Nicaragua by Tennessean William Walker<sup>16</sup> (1856-1857) tested the country's nascent sovereignty (Booth 1998; Gudmundson 1986). For decades, the state was essentially a grouping of Central Valley municipalities that were close enough to communicate with one another even over the notoriously poor roads, and it was not until there came a need to manage coffee exports that a state apparatus developed. Even then, it was very much a hands-off system of governing until once again, the need to manage and improve coffee production during the Great Depression drastically changed the political landscape (Acuña Ortega and Jiménez 1991; Hall 1976; Molina Jiménez 2005; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010).

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<sup>16</sup> Walker managed to briefly become President of Nicaragua and was defeated by Costa Rican and Guatemalan forces in 1856. He was executed in Honduras in 1860. That defeat, which prevented Walker from encroaching onto Costa Rican soil, gave the country one of its national heroes, a teenager named Juan Santamaría. The San José airport is named after Santamaría, and his image was used during the debates over CAFTA as a symbol of how the underdog Costa Ricans had defeated U.S. imperialists before, and could therefore do so again.



Coffee was introduced sometime between 1791 and 1808, though at first it was merely a curiosity in urban gardens. The lack of other industries and other products to export meant that coffee caught on much more quickly in Costa Rica than it did anywhere else in Latin America. By the late 1830s it was already a key export, due in no small part to the lucky fact that the Central Valley's soil, topography, and climate were remarkably well suited to growing a plant native to Yemen and Ethiopia (Gudmundson 1986; Hall 1976:35; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010). According to Hall, coffee's rapid expansion throughout the Central Valley is due to its promotion by municipalities, including an 1821 program paid for by San José residents that distributed free coffee seedlings to the landed poor (Hall 1976:35). This example was quickly followed by surrounding towns, so much so that coffee can also be credited with fomenting the development of the country's legal system. As most coffee was processed at home in the first years, farmers needed to dry the beans outside on their patios. The theft of this drying coffee led to the creation of laws and penalties, followed shortly thereafter by the regulation of sales, in an attempt to eliminate *merodeo*, or "marauding" (Hall 1976:36-37). The fear was that if such theft was not squashed immediately, people would abandon this new cultivation, and with such a small population – around 50,000 people at the time of independence – there would not be enough supply to have any kind of market at all.

Towns – and through them, the state – slowly built up the institutions necessary to expand production. Although technically the country of Costa Rica included six of today's seven provinces (Guanacaste was part of Nicaragua until 1856), in practice it was limited to the Central Valley and a small port at Puntarenas on the Pacific coast. Thus the initiatives to expand coffee production were not so much an interest in coffee itself, but in expanding territory and state control. There were a number of barriers to this expansion, however. One was that the lack of institutions and economic infrastructure inherited from the Spanish meant that there was almost no one with any sort of experience with commercial agriculture, foreign markets, or accessing credit. Another was that the country's isolation

and small population had left it with a dearth of roads, ports, and *mano de obra* – labor (Acuña Ortega and Jiménez 1991; Hall 1976; Molina Jiménez 1987; 1988; 1991; 2008b; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010).

Hall writes that “it is not an exaggeration to attribute the development of Costa Rica’s modern economic infrastructure in large part to the desire to establish commercial production of coffee” (Hall 1976:37). Coffee, once processed, is shelf-stable for a year or more, and was therefore the perfect crop for an isolated country with essentially non-existent roads to the coasts and small, isolated villages unsuited to other forms of export production (Gudmundson 1986; Luetchford 2008; Sick 2008; Winson 1989). Yet here, again, the country faced challenges. The first *beneficios* – mills that could transform raw cherries into a shelf-stable product – were not up to the challenge of processing coffee well enough for export, even by the low standards of the mid-1800s, and it took several years before the beans were acceptable to buyers. Though the European coffee market was growing, it was still a relatively new commodity, and the fact that Costa Rica’s only port was on the Pacific coast meant that coffee had to travel first to Valparaíso, Chile, where it could be loaded onto ships heading around the Cape of Good Hope to Europe. The difficulties in communicating both with European buyers and with Pacific traders meant that coffee sometimes sat at the ports for months, and in the humid coastal climate, with poor warehousing conditions, its quality quickly deteriorated. A Caribbean port would have been even more humid, but it would also have drastically reduced the transit time to Europe (Hall 1976; Molina Jiménez 2008b). It was not, however, until the late 1880s that this became a possibility.

Coffee’s expansion north and east out of the San José Valley and eventually to Europe followed the railroads, laid down by U.S. American Minor Keith. Using bananas planted alongside the tracks, Keith would soon go on to form the United Fruit Company<sup>17</sup> (Bourgois 1989; Schlesinger and Kinzer 2005;

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<sup>17</sup> Keith’s agreement with the Costa Rican state included this right to plant bananas along the rail line between San José and Limón; control over both the railroad and bananas allowed Keith to start what would become the United

Soluri 2005; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010). The completion of the railroad in the late 1880s linked the tiny but growing Caribbean port of Limón to San José, drastically reducing shipping times to Europe and improving quality. Now, however, coffee farmers faced the challenge of international trade: when and how to get paid. There were no banks in the country until 1863, so farmers relied on credit from Europe in order to pay for their processing costs. While this system was shaky and relied heavily on foreign merchants and European stability, it made possible the expansion of coffee production and the improvement of processing (Hall 1976).

While transportation and communication were important factors in limiting the development and expansion of Costa Rica's coffee economy, so too was the lack of labor. Land was so abundant that at the time of independence even the poor owned property, and afterwards the state sold undeveloped tracts to their children and new settlers, minimizing the fragmentation of land holdings due to inheritance (Hall 1976; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010). The result was that "the majority of Costa Rican peasant farmers preferred to have their own land, even if was small, rather than work for someone else" (Hall 1976:55). This had important repercussions for limiting the expansion of large *fincas*: not only were there few people with enough capital to buy up large amounts of land suited to coffee, but those that did so had a very difficult time finding workers to grow and harvest it. The result was that as in Colombia, coffee production formed around family labor rather than hired workers, with only the largest *fincas* needing to hire temporary workers at the height of the harvest season (Palacios 1980:12). Only in the Turrialba and Reventazón Valleys was anyone able to access labor and land in the quantities seen elsewhere in Central America; while the historical processes that made this possible are not entirely clear, it seems that this region's variety of crops, such as sugar and bananas, with harvest seasons that complemented coffee's was an important factor. Rather than facing the challenge of urgently needing workers for only a few intense weeks out of the year, farmers and later millers in this

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Fruit Company, later known as *el pulpo* (the Octopus) because it had its tentacles everywhere in Central America (Schlesinger and Kinzer 2005).

region southeast of Cartago were able to draw on a stable, reliable population of workers (Hall 1976:51-53).

Even here, mill owners were still not entirely insulated from labor problems: for example, a cholera outbreak in 1856 is estimated to have killed 7% of the total population just as coffee exports were starting to take off. The disease was brought to the region by William Walker, the Tennessee *filibustero* who briefly became President of Nicaragua and who attempted to invade Costa Rica (Booth 1998; Booth, et al. 2006). Beyond further straining an already limited labor pool and raising salaries for those who survived, the outbreak highlighted another deficiency in Costa Rica's infrastructure: there were few doctors, and the only medicine available to treat cholera was quinine and cognac (Hall 1976:54).

In this milieu of limited and shaky export markets, seemingly abundant and endlessly fertile land, and the ability to command high prices for temporary labor, there was little incentive for farmers or millers to invest in technologies or in maintaining their farms and infrastructure. Coffee prices were high, the demands of buyers low, and with such a minimal possibility of amassing capital it would take crises on the world market combined with Costa Rica's increasing population to make such investments a necessity.

### ***Growing the Welfare State***

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With an agricultural system that essentially enforced the ethical treatment of workers (because they were so scarce), and with a socioeconomic system that limited the upward mobility of those few with access to capital and resources, it is not surprising that Costa Rica eventually developed a welfare state with strong worker protections based on the maintenance of the status quo. The two – coffee and social protections – became deeply entangled, to the point where the contemporary dismantling of the welfare state apparatus has been made possible only by coffee's declining importance.

I do not wish to argue that the Costa Rican economic and political elite were more benign than their counterparts elsewhere, but rather that the conditions of Costa Rica's development as a country made it difficult for them to act otherwise. Landlocked within a country with two ocean coasts, the Costa Rican economy needed farmers who could grow shelf-stable crops. Unlike in Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, or Guatemala, where the tiny Spanish and Spanish-descendant population exercised control over indigenous and impoverished populations by force, farmers in Costa Rica were by comparison relatively well-off. While disagreements over prices and contracts certainly arose, they did so under a state apparatus that enabled relatively free speech and equal access to justice.<sup>18</sup> In fact, when in the 1920s farmers disagreed with the *beneficiarios* (mill owners) over prices and methods of payment, the state intervened in a decade-long process which resulted in the creation of the Institute for the Defense of Coffee and the regulation of prices on a national level (Hall 1976:116). Elsewhere in the isthmus, the state response to attempts at negotiation and compromise was almost always violent; consider, for example, the Salvadoran uprising of 1832 and civil war of 1980-1992, the Guatemalan civil war of 1960-1996, the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua from 1979-1990 as a response to the decades of Somoza dictatorship, and the decades of state violence and repression in Honduras, where military coups have, on different occasions, both propagated violence and brought it to an end (Barry 1987; Edelman 2008; Fried 1983; Grandin 2000; Handy 1984; Holden 2004; McCreery 1994; Williams 1994).<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned above, the small group that comprised the political and economic elite in Costa Rica was descended from Spanish merchants. Not coincidentally, this group was enlarged in the nineteenth century mainly by the arrival of other foreign merchants, mostly British and German, who

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<sup>18</sup> The National Archives in San José has records dating back at least to the early 1800s of complaints brought by individuals against other individuals and corporations, including U.S. owned corporations, that they felt had mistreated them. Of course, this archive lacks any record of farmers who were unable or unwilling to bring such complaints, but I believe that the conditions in Costa Rica at the time kept this number to a minimum.

<sup>19</sup> But contrast this with Colombia, which also had numerous small farmers and a growing region that was relatively far from the coasts, but which experienced a number of periods of political unrest, often coinciding with the international drops in coffee prices that led to state conciliation in Costa Rica (Bergquist 1978; Palacios 1980).

moved to Costa Rica as part of expanding their coffee business and later intermarried with local families (Gudmundson 1986). This is not to say that it was impossible for local farmers to amass capital and move into the upper class, but it was certainly not common (Hall 1976:53). As Costa Rica's exports increased, the *beneficiarios* concentrated their power through three forms of control: monopolization of credit; domination of the import and export trade; and control over the *beneficios*, which, no matter how much they needed the farmers, nonetheless formed a bottleneck between the farmer and the exporter. (Hall 1976:53; Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:50). This power was intensely concentrated: only seven of the forty-three presidents from 1824 – 1948 were not coffee growers, millers, or exporters, or closely related to one (Williams 1994:211-218).

Unintentionally, perhaps, this need to spend state resources on *beneficiarios* ultimately benefitted most peasant farmers, particularly those who were close to San José and the center of political power. National projects demanded by millers and exporters included the construction of ports, bridges, and roads<sup>20</sup> as well as access to resources such as land, labor, and capital that lay outside the control of local municipalities (Williams 1994:205); recall that for the first few decades of independence, these Central Valley towns more closely resembled tiny independent nations than parts of a polity, but as their need to reach outside their boundaries increased, so too did their reliance on the state in practice and not just in name. Eventually, this slow, halting expansion outwards created a strong, rural middle class with little differentiation in terms of access to resources or capital, fomenting Costa Rica's social cohesion and political stability (Seligson 1980); I will argue that although this relative uniformity had its benefits, the tendency towards maintaining the status quo in the name of stability and order also has its downside. Regardless, at the time they were implemented, these state infrastructure projects benefitted almost the entire population, not just the few who had access to state coffers. They also had

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<sup>20</sup> Ironically, Costa Rica once again has some of the worst roads in Central America, according to Lonely Planet, my own experiences, and my informal survey of travelers. Car rental companies only offer 4-wheel-drive vehicles to anyone who admits that they will be driving beyond the metropolitan region.

the effect of transferring power from municipalities, particularly the four who had once gone to war with each other, and to the state, reinforcing it as the seat and source of power.

Costa Rica's contemporary welfare state apparatuses began in the 1930s, although the potential for such apparatuses was created even earlier, with the military legally subordinated to the government only two years after independence from Spain (Lentner 1993:39). The early focus on state intervention for the benefit of many, although a perhaps unintended consequence of a strong coffee-producing oligarchy hoping to gain easier access to world markets, led directly if unevenly to the highly educated population that now produces microprocessors and medical equipment alongside coffee and sugar. Paige (1997:223) argues that "coffee reinforced Costa Rican democracy by providing the financial basis for upward mobility through education and creating a well-educated middle-class society," although the poorest peasants were forced into wilder areas such as Talamanca to the southeast and the Nicoya Peninsula to the northwest, far removed from the benefits of coffee production or supposedly universal education (Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:65).

It was the Great Depression that formalized the welfare state, though the various economic crises precipitated by the rise and fall of coffee prices accustomed Costa Ricans to a state that would step in to manage money and protect small farmers and their access to credit (Hall 1976:48). Additionally, the state responded to each crisis by encouraging farmers, through various methods, to maintain if not increase their production. Unlike Brazil, which supplied so much of the world's coffee that it could provoke a crisis of over- or under-supply, Costa Rica's share of the world market was tiny, but it was relatively differentiated because of its higher quality. The idea was that higher yields would help farmers better take advantage of high prices, while in the case of low prices, they could at least be somewhat protected against losses by having a higher volume to sell (Hall 1976:152). The state had also been involved in marketing coffee prior to the Depression, participating in both the Chicago Exposition of 1893 and the St. Louis Fair in 1904, as well as the first international coffee conference, held in New

York City in 1902 (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:123-127). The idea was both to improve on Costa Rica's still-developing international relations, particularly in the United States, as well as to sell Costa Rica as a destination for tourism and investment.

While the Chicago Exposition booth included displays on archaeology, art, literature, and mining, coffee was the most emphasized product because the nascent tourism ministry considered it the most important (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:123). In St. Louis, the Costa Rica team handed out pamphlets to the press and aired advertisements on the radio, attempting to educate consumers about the health and sensory benefits of coffee consumption (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:126). At the New York conference, Costa Rica pushed for an end to the disastrous rise and fall of prices by advocating the creation of a worldwide producers' group that would regulate production, sell directly to buyers rather through intermediaries, and sell all grades of coffee on the international market, so that each consumer could have access to the quality he or she desired (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:125). Although Costa Rica's demands went unmet at the time, they presaged the International Coffee Agreement that would be signed in the 1960s and which would prove critical for maintaining coffee prices through the 1980s. Its marketing emphasis on quality and consumer education would also prove to be the backbone both of Costa Rican coffee sales and of the specialty coffee industry more broadly.

Given their lack of social, economic, and political capital, concentrating power in the hands of a few may have helped the nation's growth. At these fairs and conferences as well as elsewhere, coffee farmers presented "an external façade of national political stability to attract the capital necessary to build railways into the coffee districts and to undertake other major infrastructure projects that were beyond the financial means of town governments" and the state (Williams 1994:206). That is, the export requirements of coffee pushed the *beneficiarios*, and through them the state, to put aside disagreements in order to accomplish greater goals that benefitted a wide range of farmers and mill



owners, furthering a national sentiment of shared sacrifice and compromise that made possible the formal welfare state.

Labor requirements, too, played an important role in political stability and maintaining the status quo. It was easiest for farmers to maintain control over the quality of their crop when they relied only on family labor, but both the increasing complexity of quality requirements over the years and the expanding size and number of farmers meant that the scarcity of laborers could put the harvest in jeopardy even as it limited the rise of large *fincas* (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:22). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,<sup>21</sup> coffee ripened relatively evenly within a given zone, meaning that a lot of hands were needed for a short period of time to bring the crop in before it started rotting on the trees. Since the ripening time depended on altitude – the lower the farm, the earlier in the year its coffee would be ready – it was possible for laborers to move from region to region between the months of September and March. If, however, farmers failed to pay well, they would either be left without temporary workers or their workers would pick green or rotting fruit, lowering the price received at the mill.

### ***State Control and the Export Economy***

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The strong connections between the political elite and the owners of the means of coffee processing meant that it was no surprise when the state started to take an official interest in maintaining the quality of the crop. From the first harvest in 1820 it was clear that Costa Rica could never compete with Colombia or Brazil in terms of quantity, so they would have to do so in terms of quality if they wanted to compete on the world market. In the late 1800s scientists, some independent and some employed by the Department of Agriculture, began publishing recommendations for growing quality coffee, which emphasized the importance of the right combination of altitude, rainfall, and temperature; that is, they recommended that coffee only be grown in particular locations within the

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<sup>21</sup> This is less true today, as climate change has had a profound impact on the consistency of ripening times. See chapters 2 and 5.

country (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:22). What was considered “quality” was then as now a combination of measurable and symbolic parameters, which will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter. In order to illustrate these characteristics to farmers, a model or “pattern” bean was established, with physical characteristics (e.g. size, shape, color) that were supposed to indicate the desirability of the less-measurable sensorial characteristics contained within. Until the 1930s the state took only a minimal interest in regulating these characteristics, relying instead on individual farmers, mills, and exporters to work it out amongst themselves.

In the first thirty years of the twentieth century, farmers, scientists, and politicians engaged in sometimes vociferous debates about the origins of quality and the ability of humans to improve it. This debate mainly centered around the short-lived introduction of robusta beans, which produce hardier but less flavorful coffees. Robusta was better suited to the soil and altitude conditions of marginal regions, such as the province of Guanacaste, but its presence was seen as a threat to farmers everywhere. Because it also bore the Costa Rican name and could potentially be mixed in with higher-quality Arabica beans, robusta “*se podía desacreditar la fama del café costarricense;*” robusta could discredit Costa Rican coffee’s good name (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:27). Another producer argued that Costa Rican coffee was “nearly perfect” due to the “many years of effort and progress,” making immediate competition unlikely unless the industry failed to respond to these challenges (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:87). Given the outcry, in order to maintain Costa Rica’s reputation robusta was eventually outlawed, but not before ushering in a “zonification” project that demarcated eight different coffee zones throughout the country, each with their own set of flavor characteristics and growing challenges (Gudmundson 1986; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010). The idea was that despite the country’s small size, each region had such unique flavor characteristics that it was a mistake to treat them all the same way, both in terms of production and consumption.

Along with zonification came an increasing interest in, and reliance on, technical knowledge about soil, shade, fertilizer, and pesticides, and their concomitant on coffee yields and coffee quality (see below).

The Great Depression crashed the banana- and coffee-fueled export economy and, along with World War II, radically refigured Costa Rica's market relationships. England, by far the biggest importer (and reseller) of Costa Rican coffee, essentially stopped buying coffee altogether, while Germany under the Third Reich had complicated the terms of exchange so much that it was probably a relief when the war made further trade almost impossible (Hall 1976; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010). More than shifting trade from Europe to the United States, however, the Depression and the war forced the Costa Rican government to evaluate coffee's role in national development in the face of trade insecurity and the growing dominance of a few *beneficiarios*. The crisis was such that it provoked two questions that went to the heart of Costa Rican national identity: "Will our continued dependence on coffee be advantageous? What could be the alternatives to this dependence?"<sup>22</sup> (Hall 1976:152).

These questions would return at the start of the twenty-first century, but at the time the answer was to continue growing quality coffee, to attempt to diversify agricultural production, and to support urbanization and the development of underdeveloped industries. To the first end, in 1933 the Institute for the Defense of Coffee (IDC) was formed, a government ministry charged with regulating trade, labor, and land use as well as improving Costa Rica's coffee and marketing it abroad (ICAFE 1992; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010). The Defense Institute became ICAFE (*Instituto del Café de Costa Rica*; Costa Rican Coffee Institute) with the 1948 Constitution, and is today a semiautonomous agency led by a board composed of both government and private-sector representatives (ICAFE 1992).

In the 1930s and 1940s, the IDC was focused on radically improving the quality of fields that had gone for decades without any real interest or attention from farmers, a project that took off after coffee prices soared in the 1950s (Hall 1976:152-156). It also pushed for farmers to organize into cooperatives

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<sup>22</sup> *Será conveniente nuestra continua dependencia sobre el café? Cuáles podrían ser algunas de las alternativas de esa dependencia?*

to pool their knowledge, risk, and ability to negotiate with *beneficiarios*, who in the face of improved access to capital were beginning to consolidate their power and control over the country's mills (Hall 1976:152-153). In 1940, the IDC was also party to the Washington Convention, the International Coffee Agreement's predecessor, which set a system of quotas and fixed prices that allowed Costa Rica to sell quality coffee in the United States. This market access would prove crucial during World War II, but a secondary result of the Washington Convention was that it finally gave farmers access to agriculturally-focused credit in the form of the *Banco Nacional*, the National Bank (Acuña Ortega and Jiménez 1991; Hall 1976; Molina Jiménez 1988; 2005; 2010(2008)). The Bank bought up the country's oversupply of coffee, holding it until it could be sold, and extended long-term loans to farmers that better matched the ebbs and flows of coffee production.

The Great Depression had crashed the coffee market, but World War II forced its total reorganization and cemented the state's role in managing production. Until 1940, England had been by far the biggest importer of Costa Rican coffee, and like other European countries, it was seen as having an appreciation for quality that the United States was lacking (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:101). When the war broke out, England's purchases declined, leaving Costa Rican producers scrambling to find buyers for their beans. The lack of buyers led to a decline in quality control, as few farmers and mills were willing to invest when there was no one to whom to sell. Yet as the war continued, and thanks to the Washington Convention, Costa Rica did find a new market: the United States. The U.S. military issued coffee rations to its soldiers, fueling a habit that would have massive ramifications for coffee production worldwide. Much of what the soldiers consumed was freeze-dried, instant, or otherwise of inferior quality – the idea was to get them caffeine, not to introduce them to a world of differentiation and flavor nuance (Pendergrast 1999; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010). Costa Rica's emphasis on quality, origin, and provenience was not important to the U.S. military or the average U.S. consumer; all that mattered was the price. The result was that farmers and mills had little

incentive to improve their quality, and some started mixing in green coffee with the ripe cherries in order to boost their sales. This move was lamented, as the introduction of robusta had been some forty years before, as “throwing to the ground [*ha echado por el suelo*] the name that it cost us so much effort to obtain” (Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010:101).

Towards the end of the war it became clear that the United States would soon be not only the world’s superpower, but the number one destination of Costa Rican beans. Again worried about competition with Colombia and Brazil, the Coffee Defense Institute implemented a number of laws and decrees designed to protect the Costa Rican brand name. The number of small family farms and independent mills made this difficult, so a body of inspectors was formed. These inspectors had the authority to fine both farmers and millers who mixed green, ripe, and/or fermented cherries, who did not maintain cleanliness and hygiene standards for their workers or for their coffee, and who engaged in other acts that would lower the quality of their coffee. That is, whereas once mills decided what coffee to accept for the export market and what would be sold on the less-remunerative domestic market, now these decisions were institutionalized by a body that had both the willpower and the manpower to ensure that the standards were met. As a result, coffee quality improved, and ICAFE has been working to maintain those standards ever since (ICAFE 1992; Samper Kutschbach and Peters Solorzano 2001; Viales Hurtado and Montero Mora 2010).

Managing quality standards and enforcing weights and measures was not the only act the state took towards institutionalization and social welfare in the 1930s and the 1940s. The list of state reforms during this era is somewhat overwhelming, including, but not limited to, passing a minimum wage law in 1935 and undertaking banking reform in 1936 (Lentner 1993:64; Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:100), as well as suspending foreign debt payments, instituting high protectionist tariffs, devaluing the currency, and implementing public works projects (Edelman 1999:51). Again, the outbreak of World War II in 1939 led to a drop in state revenues just as they were beginning to recover from the Depression;

despite this drop, President Calderón enacted the first labor and security laws – assisted by elected Communist legislators – in the 1940s. The University of Costa Rica was established in 1940, followed by nationalized Social Security (the “Caja”) in 1941, and the labor code in 1943, effectively laying the foundation for the post-revolutionary welfare state. Unlike elsewhere in Central America, the Communists remained a legal – and viable – political party (Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:102-103), due in part to the United States’ alliance with the Soviet Union during World War II and its willingness to look the other way for the duration of the war (Lentner 1993:65)<sup>23</sup>.

The Costa Rican state’s history of interventionism and its attention to workers’ needs under the coffee caudillos of the 1800s can be directly seen in the state’s stability during World War II and the democratic mechanisms under which Communism continued to operate (Molina Jiménez and Palmer 2007:107). In 1948 a brief civil war ensued, fueled in part by complaints about Calderón’s reforms. Despite these complaints, the ruling junta under national icon “Pepe” Figueres nationalized the banking and insurance industries; maintained Calderón’s social reforms; gave suffrage to women and blacks; rewrote (with Congress) the Constitution from 1948-1949, abolishing the army; created the national public works program ICE, the Costa Rican Electricity Institute; implemented a capital gains tax; and finally, voluntarily turned power over to election winner (and member of the oppositional party) Otilio Ulate in 1949. This series of events and reforms weakened considerably the coffee bourgeoisie’s control over the state and the economy while creating a modern welfare state (Molina & Palmer 2007:107 – 111, Booth et al. 2006:56, Edelman 1999:55). The depth of these reforms led Figueres to state that “Costa Rica is not a country. It is a pilot project. It is an experiment” (Hoffman 2008:2).

Edelman (1999:47) calls this long history of Costa Rican democracy and sense of egalitarianism a “cultural substrate that contributed to a profoundly reformist, conciliatory streak in Costa Rican politics, democratic or not.” Even when it was briefly governed by military dictators, sovereignty still inhered in

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<sup>23</sup> See Paige 1997 for a much more detailed description of the Communist party and its role in Costa Rican politics.

the state as an institution, rather than in those individual leaders: the state still functioned *as a state* to provide expected services to its citizens, rather than as a series of populist leaders who needed to be appeased in different ways. Moreover, in Costa Rica “institutions were created to mediate and diffuse class and political confrontation, accumulate knowledge on the conditions of the laboring poor to serve as the basis for anticipating and preempting social crises, and to further the state’s capacity to educate the laboring groups in questions of moral decency, honest toil, racial hierarchies, and national productivity” (Palmer 1996:247).

Molina Jiménez, both in personal communication and in his writing (2005; 2007; 2008a; 2008d; 2010(2008)), has been an outspoken critic of the romantic perspective through which Costa Ricans view these state apparatuses, arguing that these narratives have been produced for political ends rather than remaining true to the political historiography of the period. Costa Ricans today readily point to coffee as the source of their superiority in Central America, although unsurprisingly, they do not trace its role as I have done here. While there is much to critique in the narratives crafted by Costa Ricans and by the state, the fact remains that at the same time that Communists were accepted as a legitimate political party and social reforms were being passed in Costa Rica, increasingly authoritarian regimes were coming into power elsewhere in Central America, and the United States was actively intervening to prevent land and social reform in Guatemala. It is in implementing, and later maintaining, this commitment to a welfare state apparatus that Costa Rica remains exceptional within Central America, and indeed within Latin America more broadly. While I argue that in many respects Costa Rican history and a reliance on a single export crop renders it more similar to Colombia and the Southern Cone countries, in the case of the pre-1980s welfare state it resembles the Scandinavian countries in its orientation and goals, if not in the extent and efficacy of its reach (Harvey 2005). Where it differs is in its relationships with the United States and its role as a “showcase democracy” during the tumultuous

1980s.<sup>24</sup> Although Costa Rica's relationship with the U.S. appears on the surface to be mutually beneficial, it is still, like elsewhere in the region, characterized by a lopsided balance of power and an increasing reliance on U.S. tourism, imports, and investments.

### ***State, Neoliberalism and the Debt Crisis***

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In the early 1980s, Latin America experienced a debt crisis, one that challenged but did not dismantle the welfare state apparatus that had been so carefully constructed over the past forty years. It did, however, set the groundwork for later changes. In 2007, the hotly contested passage of CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) pushed the Costa Rican state far past what many would have imagined to be possible just a few years earlier. As coffee prices declined and multinational corporations came to dominate the scene more thoroughly than ever before, power became ever more concentrated in the hands of the few. This is not to say that coffee is solely responsible for neoliberalism in Costa Rica, but coffee's decline helped make neoliberalization possible by making it thinkable. That is, ideas about responsibility, obligation, profit and family changed with the coffee crisis, which coincided with the debt crisis and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of undocumented Nicaraguan migrants fleeing their country's civil war.

In Costa Rica, the debt crisis led to IMF and World Bank intervention and a more privatized economy opened to foreign investment (Edelman 1991; 1999; 2001; Mora Alfaro 2009; Sandbrook, et al. 2007; Topik, et al. 2006), in which historical forms of welfare state regulation and governance have shifted but not disappeared (Esping-Anderson 1996b; Harvey 2005a; 2006b). Overall, the embrace of neoliberal economic policy has been "half-hearted" in Costa Rica (Sandbrook, et al. 2007:95), in that the state has followed some but not all of the World Bank's structural adjustment requirements. This has led to an economic system of organization that falls neither within the traditional literature on neoliberalism nor within studies of social welfare states. This is far from unusual: as has been

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to overstate the beneficence of the United States towards Costa Rica: see Honey 1994 for a detailed description of the "hostile acts" of the United States during the 1980s.



demonstrated by anthropologists in the last two decades, neoliberalism does not take the same form everywhere, as the ideological and economic forms of organization that neoliberalism espouses are always contingent on local histories and interpretations (e.g. (Coronil 1997; Elyacher 2005; Freeman 2000; 2007; Goldman 2005; Ong 1988; 2006; Sawyer 2004). I first examine studies of neoliberalism's effects on ideology and praxis (Foucault 2010; Goldman 2005; Harvey 2005a; 2006a; Jaffee 2007) before concluding this chapter with a discussion on welfare states in general and the neoliberalization of Costa Rica's welfare state.

### **Neoliberalism and States**

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (Harvey 2005a:2)

Proponents of neoliberalism as a guiding economic paradigm argue that it is founded on the liberal ideals of individual freedom and dignity, and that free markets exist to enhance those individual freedoms and maximize the public good. In essence, the state should remove itself from the equation in order to allow the market work naturally and efficiently to set prices. State-owned enterprises should be privatized, beginning with utilities and transportation and moving to social security, prisons, and health services. Under this ideology, capital should also be deregulated; that is, anything seen as a barrier to trade should be removed; the needs of businesses are, as a side effect, frequently elevated over the needs of people, and it is only goods, and not people, that are allowed to move freely across borders (Goldman 2005; Harvey 2005a; Hudson and Hudson 2003). Neoliberal ideologists argue that freedom cannot exist without the free market and free trade; this connection between neoliberalism and freedom was used as a justification for U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003 and as an explanation for the fall of the Soviet Union. Freedom, under this ideology, is not only nonexistent without a free market, it is

guaranteed once markets are opened to Adam Smith's invisible hand<sup>25</sup> (Harvey 2005a:5-7; Topik, et al. 2006:4). The welfare state is seen as a barrier to freedom, economic development, employment, and personal liberties: neoliberal institutions such as the IMF and World Bank thus hold that state ownership of resources and state provisions for social services must be dismantled (Esping-Anderson 1996a:1).

Free trade, once referring to the ability to trade freely with anyone, has come to mean "trade without duty," that is, without taxes or with a minimum of taxes (Topik, et al. 2006:4). In Latin America, free trade was initially adopted in part because it was a means to break away from Iberian control in the decades after independence. By elevating civil society, secular powers, private property, and rationality over centralized state control, religious ideology, public property, and tradition, newly independent state leaders were able to distinguish themselves from Spanish colonial rulers (Topik, et al. 2006:4). Although this basic concept of neoliberalism – removing barriers to trade – has been around for centuries, orthodox neoliberalism as an organizational ideology was first attempted in Chile under dictator Augusto Pinochet, who had replaced Socialist President Salvador Allende in a violent coup orchestrated by the CIA in 1973. A team of University of Chicago economists, trained by Milton Friedman, worked with the IMF to completely restructure Chile's economy, privatizing almost all public assets (except copper, but including social security) and violently quashing any resistance or outcry (Harvey 2005a:8; Hershberg and Rosen 2006b:4; Klein 2007:76-85; Winn 2004). A few years later, the Latin American debt crisis embedded the structural adjustment policies of the IMF and the World Bank more deeply into most Latin American nations, but it also managed to somewhat temper the neoliberal fever in Chile and provide "helpful experience to support the subsequent turn to neoliberalism in both Britain (under Thatcher) and the US (under Reagan) in the 1980s" (Harvey 2005a:9). Seen first as a response to the failures of communism and capitalism, neoliberalism has come to deepen the divide

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<sup>25</sup> But see Julia Elyacher's *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State* (2005) for a discussion of Smith's "invisible hand" not as a self-regulating market but one which more evenly distributed wealth.

between rich and poor, to concentrate more wealth at the upper reaches of the spectrum, and has, Harvey argues, been a political project aimed at restoring power to the elite economic class threatened by the socialist turn of the 1970s (Harvey 2005a:9-19).

Neoliberal economic projects are concerned with molding and shaping bodies and institutions to fit their ideologies and goals. In order for neoliberal economic policies and prescriptions to be followed, society – and the individuals which comprise it – must be figured and refigured in order to “fit” properly. Predicated on an unquestionable belief in individual freedom and individual rights, neoliberal ideological projects seek to make “subjects responsible for their own civility or savagery, development or regression, social health or disease” (Sawyer 2004:15). Individuals are then held responsible for their failure to develop, their failure to escape poverty, or their failure to get well, as systemic or institutional barriers to development or health are ignored or explained away (Biehl 2005; 2007; Harvey 2005a; 2005b; 2006b; Ong 1988). The result of three decades of neoliberalism is an ideology that mirrors the U.S. American dream: anyone can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, and anyone who is poor or uneducated or sick simply isn’t trying hard enough. Those who do not conform to this vision risk being consigned to Biehl’s “zones of abandonment” (2005; 2007), where nonconforming bodies are literally and figuratively written out of the picture. Thus neoliberal ideological thought permeates all aspects of society, leading policymakers, politicians, and even Oprah to making particular kinds of decisions based on these hegemonic assumptions about freedom, self-help, and inequality (Goldman 2005:33; Harvey 2005a:5; Peck 2008). Bourgois (2002) demonstrates that even when one is an anthropologist and preternaturally aware of the structural difficulties involved in overcoming poverty and discrimination, this notion of individual responsibility has become so hegemonic and so widespread that it is difficult to step outside of this overriding focus on individual responsibility to forgive or explain deleterious action.

In other words, “neoliberalism has now become a frame of mind, a cultural dynamic, an entrepreneurial personality type, and a rule of law that penetrates the most intimate relations people have with each other, state apparatuses, and their natural environments” (Goldman 2005:8). While this penetration, and its concomitant effects on individual and group practices, may not always be intentional, careful study by anthropologists have demonstrated the various forms in which this reshaping can take place. By examining this neoliberal discipline within the context of a welfare state, I hope to shed more light on the ways in which this discipline is internalized, challenged, and reshaped in a milieu that has not been sufficiently examined anthropologically.

For neoliberal economists, the market is the “rational alternative to the wasteful folly of the state” (Latour 2007:4). This economic philosophy thus necessarily has important repercussions for state governmentality, since it insists that states divest themselves of investments that would be “better” and more efficiently managed by private enterprise, which is more flexible and can more rapidly respond to market pressures. Although neoliberal orthodoxy is predicated on the notion that the “neoliberal state should favor strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005a:64), state intervention in the market in various forms is in fact a requirement for the model to continue working properly (Harvey 2005a:64-86), and high tariffs and a strong economic presence are the norm even in states vaunted for their economic liberalism (Topik, et al. 2006:5). Daviron and Ponte (2007:21) argue that a purely neoliberal market, that is, one completely free of state and corporate intervention, would be a “market without power.”

The debate in anthropology has hinged not as much on the content of neoliberal ideology as on its effects and applications, which have generally been recognized within the field as deleterious not only to individuals and their livelihoods, but to the environment and in some cases, to the very fabric of society (Biehl 2005; 2007; Bulmer-Thomas 1994; Coronil 1997; Goldman 2005; Harvey 2005a; 2005b; 2006a; Mintz 1985). That is, anthropologists have examined the political and social ramifications of

neoliberalism in various locations, particularly as they contrast with the ideology's intended effects, that is, with the notion that the rising economic tide will lift all boats, that tax cuts for the rich will "trickle-down" to the poor, and that wealth will become more equitably and efficiently distributed. While David Harvey has discussed what he calls a "developmental state" (Harvey 2005:72), where state intervention in fields such as health care and education are seen as a "crucial prerequisite to gaining competitive advantage in world trade" (Harvey 2005:72) alongside active interventionism in creating a good business climate for foreign and domestic investment, this research has generally ignored the case of Costa Rica to focus instead on various developmental state models in Asia, Scandinavia, and Europe. In studies where Latin America has been included, Costa Rica has been explained away as an "exception" or an anomaly (Esping-Anderson 1996b; Haggard and Kaufman 2008; Hershberg and Rosen 2006a; Huber 1996; Huber and Stephens 2001; Riesco 2007; Segura-Ubiergo 2007). I aim here to expand Harvey's notion of the developmental state by challenging the notion that Costa Rica is always only an anomaly.

### **The Welfare State**

A welfare state is a political, economic, and moral project. In political and economic terms, it argues that the state should be the one to care for the people, that the rights of citizenship should be expanded to allow for greater demands on state resources as well for a guarantee of at least minimal economic security, and that resources ranging from oil and copper to utilities such as power plants and water treatment should be owned and managed by the state (Esping-Anderson 1996a). In the post-World War II era, the rise of welfare states in Europe was tied to nation-building projects as protection against both fascism and bolshevism, creating a basis for national solidarity in an age of fragmentation and upheaval (Esping-Anderson 1996a:2-3). Morally, "the welfare state promised a more universal, classless justice and solidarity of 'the people;' [after World War II] it was presented as a ray of hope to those who were asked to sacrifice for the common good in the war effort" (Esping-Anderson 1996a:2).

In Latin America, social policy has generally focused on health care, pensions, and price subsidies and controls, with select state ownership of natural resources (Huber 1996:142). Huber (1996:144) argues that Latin America's policy of import substitution industrialization (ISI) created certain groups that were deemed protectable by the state, a position with which Hershberg and Rosen (2006b:4) agree, and which therefore leads to Agamben's argument that there are particular categories of people who are always exceptions and always outside state protection. The protected groups were, not surprisingly, members of the middle and working class who were employed and were looking for state protection from accidents, illness, and/or old age, further splitting the haves from the have nots. Overall, the Latin American welfare state has been relatively weak and uncommon, with most states trending towards what Lentner (1993:4) calls an "oligarchic state...a system of domination by a class that confuses its private interests with the public interests of the state" (Edelman 1992; 1999; Hershberg and Rosen 2006b; Huber 1996; Paige 1978; 1997; Williams 1986; 1994). The ramifications of this inequality and the tendency towards small and/or informal enterprises have been that in these states, "there was no potential to form worker-peasant alliances in support of universalistic social policy" (Huber 1996:146). The lack of a strong middle class and the focus on supporting the few at the expense of the many made revolution inevitable for much of Latin America, given that there was no space for compromise or alliance (Lancaster 1992).

Esping-Anderson (1996a:6-7) argues that the welfare state model faces two challenges: one, that the needs and risks of populations have changed more rapidly than state programs designed to address their demands; and two, that demographics and changing economic conditions threaten the future ability of welfare states to provide for their citizens. Interestingly, his editorial introduction focuses on internal concerns rather than external demands or challenges. My only explanation for this is that he is more concerned with Scandinavian model states, which are rarely subjected to the demands of structural adjustment. Esping-Anderson fails to account for the extreme imbalances of power that

characterize the relationships between modern states, particularly in the case of the United States and Central America. Harvey falls victim to the same omission: his depiction of social democrat or developmental states includes Scandinavia, Britain, and some Asian countries, but fails to discuss any Latin American examples (Harvey 2005a:71). Though Costa Rica may indeed be exceptional in its ability to resist pressures to move to a neoliberal state model, this resistance came about under a series of circumstances that only further highlight the country's unequal relationship with the United States – hardly an exceptional position within Latin America.

While the role of the United States in Latin America, particularly Central America, has been a topic of interest for decades, producing a rich literature that spans anthropology, political science, and history, the connections between welfare state systems and U.S. non-involvement are relatively unexplored. While Huber (1996) does discuss what she called “social democratic” models in Latin America, she does so while focusing on Chile and Brazil, and only secondarily discusses Argentina and Costa Rica. She is concerned more with labor movements and the power of the people in the post-World War II period to make demands on the state, while, as we saw earlier, in Costa Rica welfare state structures began *before* World War II and were frequently implemented without labor movements or public agitation.

### ***Neoliberalizing the Welfare State***

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The welfare state as described above came under serious threat during the economic crisis that slammed Latin America during the 1980s. The crisis illuminated the Costa Rican welfare system's deficiencies and eventually led to the abandonment of many state-sponsored programs (Edelman 1999:74). One of the many problems the country faced during this time was that much of Costa Rica's state spending had been financed with borrowing rather than revenues, and the country required IMF and World Bank financing to escape its cash flow problems (Almeida and Walker 2006; Cordero and Mora 1998; Edelman 1999; Ferreira 2009; Honey 1994; Rayner 2008; Wilson 1998). In Costa Rica's case,

the conditions of structural adjustment and borrowing included cutting spending on and investment in the public sector, as well as raising taxes, utility rates, and interest rates (Edelman 1999:77-78). The goal was to turn the welfare state, with its emphasis on publicly-owned institutions, into a neoliberal state, where state apparatuses were supposed to “facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital” (Harvey 2005a:7).

But because Costa Rica was considered by the United States to be a “showcase democracy” and a critical buffer zone between Noriega in Panama and Sandinista Nicaragua,<sup>26</sup> it received more favorable loan and structural adjustment terms than other countries in the region. This support from the United States was not new; Costa Rica was able to abolish its army in 1948, and to redirect spending to social programming and education, in part because the state knew that the United States would provide armed assistance if there were ever need. That is, Costa Rica relied upon this unequal relationship to reallocate state spending and remake itself as a relatively untouchable state, as no army in the region wanted to take on the United States (Ameringer 1978; Barahona, et al. 1999; Bell 1971; Booth 1998; Cruz 2005; Edelman 1999; Gudmundson 1986; Honey 1994; Itzigsohn 2000; Lehoucq and Molina Jiménez 2002; Longley 1997; Molina Jiménez 2005; 2007; 2008c; Sandoval-García 2004; Wilson 1998; Winson 1989).

The IMF, under U.S. pressure, allowed for gradual economic changes, rather than its traditional “shocks” intended to bring national economies in line with its neoliberal policies (Edelman 1999; Lentner 1993).<sup>27</sup> In Costa Rica, IMF and neoliberal reforms meant essentially duplicating many state-owned programs as privately owned institutions that would compete with the state iterations, either forcing

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<sup>26</sup> The Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 and engineered the first successful Socialist revolution in Latin American since Cuba in 1959. Noriega, although an authoritarian dictator and drug lord, was on the CIA payroll almost until his overthrow in the U.S. invasion of Panama in “Operation Just Cause” in 1989. For further details of the relationship between these events and U.S. involvement in Costa Rica, see, among others, Edelman 1999 and Longley 1997.

<sup>27</sup> See Edelman 1999 for more on the complex financial transactions and maneuverings that took place between Costa Rica, the United States, the World Bank, and the IMF in the 1980s.



the state program to fold or to become more efficient. Private banks expanded their role in the national economy, nontraditional – but still export, non-subsistence agriculture – crops such as cut flowers and ornamental plants were introduced, and production for domestic consumption was discouraged. Essentially, the state was to dramatically reduce its role in the economy: profitability, not social welfare, was to be the only criteria for new state investments and programming (Edelman 1999:80; see also Silva 2009 for a further discussion of the IMF in Latin America). By market rationality, it was successful: a 2003 Heritage Foundation report ranked Costa Rica fifth-best in Latin America with regards to its market liberalization, mainly because of its low corruption and high levels of trade freedom (Spalding 2014:38)

While the state did divest itself of many institutions, others, such as social security, electricity, and telecommunications, remained under state control until 2009. And despite the high ranking from the Heritage Foundation, Costa Rica's economy remained "distorted" because of the deeply embedded "laws, regulations, norms, and provisions" that benefitted certain labor groups and producers over others (Spalding 2014:39). It is not clear which groups received this favoritism, but given the overlap between political elite and those who controlled coffee production, it seems likely that coffee in general and millers in particular would be included. As coffee declined in national importance, the control of the industry passed into fewer and fewer hands, and fewer small farmers and labor groups in any industry were able to survive the increasing competition (Spalding 2014:41).

In a number of books and articles (Edelman 1991; 1994; 1999; 2001; 2008), Marc Edelman discusses the large-scale peasant farmer reaction to the IMF's structural adjustment programs in the 1980s and the civic unrest that those policies provoked, not only among farmers but among Costa Ricans in general. This was the first true public demand for change, of the sort described by Huber (1996) above, and it represented a real break in the way politics was conducted in Costa Rica. In his 1999 ethnography, Edelman remarks that "the largely accurate [public] perception [was] that even a well-intentioned president was helpless in the face of the international financial institutions [the IMF and

World Bank]" (Edelman 1999:104). The state responded to the demands of protestors with "a classically Costa Rican combination of prolonged negotiations, minor concessions, vague promises, and sudden – yet basically sporadic and mild – repression. Certainly its benevolent image eroded, but...[in the end] it reasserted itself in the role of provider, reinforcing expectations derived from decades of living in a social welfare state" (Edelman 1999:150). Edelman's assessment agrees with Molina Jiménez's (pers. comm.), who argues that despite structural adjustment and what they saw as essentially a loss or redirection of state sovereignty from the government to the IMF and the United States, Costa Ricans "trust their state" (*confían en su estado*), a value he reaffirmed in another conversation in 2012, three years after CAFTA's divisive implementation. Even in the wake of protests against the implementation of CAFTA (Rayner 2008; 2009), and during protests I witnessed in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013, Costa Ricans still publicly address the state to resolve their problems.

Edelman (1999:81-84) argues that neoliberal orthodoxy was not as successful in Costa Rica as the IMF might have hoped because its state institutions were so strong prior to the 1980s. There have been, however, a few indicators of neoliberal "success:" more than half of Costa Rica's foreign exchange now comes from "nontraditional" exports; free-trade zones have been introduced; and state bureaucracy has been trimmed down. Agricultural budgets dropped by more than 50% between 1991 and 1995, and many state agencies have simply ceased to exist (Edelman 1999:183). Yet the existence of a highly educated and healthy middle-class labor force, able to work in a variety of fields, is a direct result of state intervention since the late 1800s, not neoliberal reform (Edelman 1999:84), and state agencies "remain absolutely central points of reference, foci of demands, and sites of struggle... The state may have diminished its size and the scope of its activities, but it still remains a fount of resources in a situation of extreme scarcity [and] a potential source of amelioration for specific problems" (Edelman 1999:187).

## CAFTA and the State in Crisis

In the decade and a half since Edelman's book was published, a new challenge to the Costa Rican welfare state has arisen. CAFTA was narrowly approved by voters in 2007, and is shifting loyalties, fears, and anxieties in ways that were not thinkable during earlier neoliberal reforms, making this a critical period in which to understand the ways in which Costa Ricans have both embraced and pushed back against neoliberalism. Intended to increase foreign investment, improve the job market, ease trade restrictions in the region, and privatize remaining state agencies and resources, CAFTA's provisions were first implemented in 2009, so many of its long-term effects are yet to be determined. What is clear, however, is that the passage of CAFTA was vitriolic and violent by Costa Rican standards, with protest marches (Almeida and Walker 2006; Rayner 2009) and "NO AL TLC"<sup>28</sup> graffiti spread throughout San José neighborhoods, despite high levels of support from medium and large business owners (Spalding 2014:76). Unusually, whether or not to sign on to CAFTA was left up to voters in a special referendum in 2007. More than just a vote on a free-trade agreement, it was a vote on Oscar Arias's presidency and a move towards more neoliberal economic policy. That is, Arias, running for re-election almost two decades after his first presidency, in which he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end the civil wars and dictatorships in Central America, campaigned in the 2006 election as a strong CAFTA supporter. In essence, a vote for him for president in 2006 would be the same as a vote for CAFTA in the 2007 referendum. His opponent, Ottón Solís, promised to renegotiate CAFTA if elected.

After a month-long recount of the vote in the presidential election, the election tribunal found that Arias had won with 40.9% compared to Solís's 39.8% (Cortés Ramos 2008; Rodríguez, et al. 2008; Spalding 2014:142). Anti-CAFTA activists, comprised of a broad coalition of university professors and students, clergy, small business owners, small-scale agriculturalists, environmentalists, and unions, responded with protest marches that shut down the main streets of San José. In the year that separated the presidential election from the referendum vote on CAFTA, activists succeeded in shifting the

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<sup>28</sup> No to the *Tratado de Libre Comercio*, or Central American Free Trade Agreement.

national debate from one that focused narrowly on elite benefits to one that pitted these elites against the Costa Rican masses who wanted only to protect their proud state institutions (Raventós 2008; Spalding 2014). Despite Arias' election being seen as a mandate for CAFTA's passage, despite being massively outspent, and despite the domination of pro-CAFTA articles and op-eds in the newspapers, the "No" activists were able to turn what had been CAFTA's foregone passage into a close race by going door-to-door, engaging neighbors and friends in debates over national identity, solidarity, and Costa Rica's future (Cortés Ramos 2008; Raventós 2008; Rayner 2008; 2009; Rodríguez, et al. 2008; Spalding 2014). Though the narrative had shifted, the referendum's results mirrored those of the presidential election a year earlier. In the end, CAFTA passed with 51.6% of the "yes" vote, the lowest approval rate in Central America (Spalding 2014:127).

CAFTA required signatories to ease tariffs, strengthen intellectual property protections, streamline business disputes and regulations, reduce the role of the state in national development projects, and simplify foreign investment (Spalding 2014:3). Yet at the start of negotiations, ICE, the electricity monopoly, had around 12,000 employees, representing some 10% of all government employees (Spalding 2014:85). It took more than a year for then-President Pacheco to agree to include telecommunications as one of the industries to be opened up to foreign competition, and he conceded on the grounds that it had to be "opened," rather than "privatized" (Spalding 2014:86). Molina Jiménez told me in one conversation that ICE's *apertura*, or opening, was the main reason that so many foreign investors and local business leaders supported CAFTA. They wanted a piece of the telecommunications pie, and the only way to get it was to force ICE to open up to competition. Certainly there was a great deal of frustration over ICE prior to its official opening in 2009: citizens waited for months to get a new phone number, only to have poor service and dropped calls. Each person could only have one land line and one cell phone number in their name, and there was no way to get a cell phone number as a

foreigner unless one was a permanent resident.<sup>29</sup> Yet rates were (and are) some of the cheapest in Latin America (and still are), and Costa Ricans were proud of ICE's attention to even its most rural customers, noting that private companies would never have bothered with customers that were not profitable. As such, opening up ICE was not just a business decision, but one that had important symbolic connotations within both the Costa Rican imaginary of nation and social solidarity, and for the ease of communication in daily life. I will return to ICE and the impact of CAFTA in the second and sixth chapters.

In this chapter I have argued that country's relative isolation during the colonial period required levels of cooperation not seen elsewhere in Central America, and that this interdependence, combined with readily available access to fertile farmland, created conditions of production that were seemingly tailor-made for success through coffee. Though power was concentrated in the hands of a few elites, these leaders were inextricably tied both to coffee farmers (as their own wealth came through coffee exports) and to improving state infrastructure (so that coffee could get to market). Costa Rica's welfare state was thus made both economically possible and politically thinkable by its early reliance on and control over coffee production, a model that has been heavily challenged by the implementation of CAFTA and the shift away from coffee specifically and agriculture more generally as the primary occupation for most citizens. The move from an agricultural to a service economy is certainly not unique to Costa Rica, but where Costa Rica differs is in its reliance on coffee as an anchor for national identity and in the historical view, somewhat idealized, of the state as one that provides for its people and thus should be preserved. I look now to the case of Orosi in order to understand how Costa Ricans in general, and Orosians in particular, came to see coffee as producing values and obligation, providing the backbone for national identity that CAFTA was to challenge.

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<sup>29</sup> For comparison, in 2002 I was able to obtain a Chilean cell phone with no problems, though I did have a *cédula*, or ID card, because I was there on a six-month study abroad program.

## Chapter Two: Producing Coffee and Values in Orosi de Cartago

“Orosi is a town blessed by God,” Jorge said as we drove through town in his taxi one day, “but it is being wasted” (*Orosi es un pueblo bendecido por Dios, pero se va desperdiciando*). A former coffee farmer, Jorge had been a taxi driver and tour guide for fifteen years, and he had many opinions on everything, especially those that related to coffee. He was particularly fond of pulling over alongside someone’s coffee field to point out problems, whether from trees he thought were too closely planted, or shade trees that were too far apart, or ground covering that had been swept too clean or left piled too high against the trunks. On this day we were talking about how Orosi had changed, a common topic during my fieldwork. Of course it had changed: fifty years earlier, there had been no electricity, no paved roads, no schools, and the only tourists had been Costa Ricans on a quasi-pilgrimage to visit the colonial church, in disrepair but still in use. The speaker’s conclusion, whether spoken or left unsaid, was always that these changes, however much easier they made life, were not for the better. Jorge was no exception.

The changes that Orosi and Costa Rica more broadly had undergone in the space of a generation were significant, and calling on the past seemed to be a way to ground oneself in a narrative, in a way of being-in-the-world, that was much more stable than the rapidly-shifting present or the unknowable future. The past was a life that had been structured around coffee production, its rhythms attuned to both the plant’s flexibility and the mutual obligation required during the harvest. Orosian identity was one of the humble *campesino*, a farmer who looked to his family first, who made his own decisions and lived with the consequences, who was connected to the land and the past by virtue of his efforts. Though the image was gendered, women were included if they were also hard workers, if they put their family first, and if they kept the household running. The *campesino* is the one positive element of Orosian, and more broadly Costa Rican, identity. The rest is built on what Costa Rica is *not*: it is not

violent, it does not have military coups or dictatorships or even an army, it is not indigenous (but see below), it has not been invaded by the United States, it is not like the rest of Central America, and it is certainly not Nicaragua (Chomsky and Lauria-Santiago 1998; Díaz Arias 2008(2005); Hayden 2003; Molina Jiménez 2008a; 2010[2003]; Sandoval-García 2004).

As coffee had slipped to a secondary occupation and then finally to one undertaken by only a few, the entire backbone of Orosi's social structure and sense of self had also slipped away, and there was nothing comparable to replace it. Moreover, at the same time that coffee was declining in social and economic importance, the protections and guarantees of the welfare state were being stripped away by structural adjustment, neoliberalization, and finally CAFTA. During the time of my fieldwork, stories of government corruption and ineptness filled the newspapers as the potholes filled the streets. Bridges were collapsing, schools were overflowing, and tourism had slowed to a trickle of what it had once been. Violence, crime, a "loss of values," the dissolution of family ties, drugs, teenage pregnancy, a lack of local jobs, and street dogs were all attributed to Orosi's rapid shift from a sleepy agricultural town to a sleepy semi-rural town that depended on government employment and tourism rather than independent farming. It was youth, however, who received the greatest share of the blame, youth and the government officials who had forgotten that Costa Rica was supposed to be for Costa Ricans. Both groups had lost their way, lost their values, and now the whole town and by extension, the whole country was suffering for it.

In the midst of this confusion, where the twin touchstones of coffee and the welfare state were no longer readily available, Orosians turned to an idealized past for answers on how to navigate the present. Their stories were of a better past that was only possible because the ugly and the messy were not part of the imaginary. To use Richard Price's (2006) term, it is a postcard version of the past, where all the difficulties and ugliness have been cropped out of the frame, and where the perspective of the viewer can never change. To take the metaphor further, the other side of a postcard has little space for

writing, so the message is one that highlights the very best and downplays or ignores any part of the story that does not coincide with the picture on the front, where everything is shown at its best angle. Indeed, these postcard narratives echoed the broader trend of Costa Rican nationalism and exceptionalism, which describe the country as the “Switzerland of Central America” (Acuña Ortega and Jiménez 1991; Hall 1976; Molina Jiménez 2008b), an oasis of peace and calm in a turbulent isthmus where everyone is, if not wealthy, not indigent, and not indigenous.

By drawing on a past that has been whitewashed on multiple levels (see below), Orosians and Costa Ricans make claims to a tightly circumscribed idea of nationality and belonging, one that is geographic as much as linguistic or racial. In Orosi, the result of these claims, of this looking backwards to an idealized past where coffee and family were paramount, has been to leave no ground from which to draw to make sense of the present. There is in Orosi a pervasive tendency towards maintaining the status quo, not because it is better but because it is familiar, and because what was done before worked well. The costs of disrupting the social order seem higher than any possible gains. In the stories that I heard people tell about the past, it came to sound like something out of a fairy tale, where everyone was brave and virtuous and hard-working and respectful and shared the little they had, in many ways the essence of *pura vida*. They were poor, but equally poor, so they were happy. The maintenance of the status quo, then, is a way to hold on to those sentiments about family and values and obligation, to reinforce them for children when the traditional means of instilling such values – agricultural work – is no longer possible or desirable. It may not provide the answers to the problems of the present or the future, but for those attempting to navigate a landscape that has changed so rapidly in less than a generation, it is the only stable ground left on which to stand.

### ***Memory and Utopian Imaginaries***

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In this chapter I follow Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995:15), who writes that in the case of Haiti “the past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a



present, just as I can point to something *over there* only because I am *here*. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past – or, more accurately, pastness – is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past *as past*.” I found this to be the case even for Orosians who had not lived through the past they were narrating: frequently younger people would talk about times long gone in the first person plural, reasoning to me that because their parents had lived through it, it was just as much their experience as if they had been there. That is, these memories belonged to them because they belonged to their family, and it was to these memories, and the lessons they sought to impart, that they looked for answers, thus bringing the past into the present.

Memories may be stored in individual brains, but they can only be remembered and understood within extant social frameworks and cultural norms (Basso 1996; Cole 2001), and in Orosi those social frameworks are almost entirely organized around family – which was once, and is no longer, organized around coffee. Rather than walking together into the hills to pick coffee, Orosians must look elsewhere for work as well as meaning. The buses that leave town between 4:30 and 5:30 in the morning are packed with people making the more than two hour trip to San José, the geographical, political, social, and economic heart of Costa Rica. Coffee fields have been sold, or left to lie fallow, or are maintained by migrant labor. Poverty is no longer a pressing issue, and has been replaced by consumerist concerns over smartphones and cars and whether to add another level onto the house. Despite, or perhaps because of, the rapid shift from agriculture to service work, it is the memory of the past, and of the belonging that accompanied it, that drives local identity and ways of making meaning.

These memories are not simply the nostalgic reminiscences of elders lamenting days gone by, though they are that too. In their telling, the work they do is to order and organize life, to denote what is important, to point out what is missing in the present. To narrate memory is to tell people what to hold on to, what to let go, and what to bring back. Memory also works beyond the level of individual conversations or family tales; it “is what drives historical narratives; that is, memory consists of the stuff

and the energy with which histories are forged or forgotten” (McGranahan 2010:19). As fragments that are not always ordered or contextualized by the person doing the remembering, memories are constructions that can only be understood within cultural frameworks. They grant even those who did not live through those times the perspective from which to visualize the future as well as providing a reference to the past (Basso 1996:7; Halbwachs 1992:43; Hale 1997:830; McGranahan 2010:20; Stoler 2002:170). Like history, memory exists against and within a particular cultural backdrop; they are individual, existing in the mind, but what is told, how it is told, and to whom it is told occurs within a group identity that frequently both reaffirms and contradicts those memories (Halbwachs 1992:40). The work of the individual – both listener and speaker – is to reconcile these contradictions and to make sense of them in a culturally and personally specific manner.

As described in the first chapter, the cultural context in which these memories are made and made sense of is one in which Costa Rica’s history is told in a way that depicts a mythical time of equality and fraternity. This is a history in the Foucauldian sense, a narrative which “empower[s] certain forms of knowledge while disempowering others” (Prakash 1994:1485). History as a national and local project is intentionally constructed and reconstructed to meet the goals of those who can control that construction and production: it is the “raw material for nationalist or idealist or fundamentalist ideologies” (Hobsbawm 1997:5). Wielded in this fashion, history differs from memory in that it has a beginning, a middle, and an end (McGranahan 2010:19). It imposes form and linear progression on a complex and fragmented period that is remembered differently by different individuals and different groups. As we will see in the case of Orosi, the only way to make the narrative of Costa Rica’s history into the present day is to leave out certain categories of people (indigenous groups, Nicaraguans) and certain ideas (of inequality and violence).

These narratives thus simultaneously produce particular “bundles of silences” about the past, eliding the violent and the complicated in favor of romanticized nostalgia (Trouillot 1995:27). The issues

here of nation-building and the narrative use of history as a way to organize people, generate authority, and shift the conditions of possibility (McGranahan 2010:19) are thus occurring within a different milieu and against different pressures than sites of war and conflict, the contexts in which the majority of the literature on history and memory has been theorized, but they are no less real because the moment of danger is not a physical danger but a cultural and emotional one.

### **Elision and Danger**

In Orosi, and Costa Rica more broadly, the work of reconciliation between memory and the complexities of the past is messy and incomplete. Certain kinds of memories – of a past where everyone knew each other, everyone was equally poor, everyone helped out the family, everyone worked hard – are narrated so frequently and so consistently that they become almost impossible to contradict: there is almost no discursive space for a less rosy vision of what came before. Memories or experiences that might fill that discursive gap are hidden, ignored, or pushed aside, either intentionally or unintentionally. What gets elided is anything that might go against the notion of Costa Rica as exceptional, peaceful, white, family-oriented, and utopian, an ideal tourist destination. Indigeneity and violence, in particular, are not a part of the story.

Elsewhere in Latin America, particularly in Central America, the literature on history and memory has been written in a geographic context that has been wracked by civil war, dictatorship, genocide, narcotrafficking and drug-war violence, and endemic poverty. Walter Benjamin's famous claim that to "articulate the past historically...means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin 1968:255) was for many Central Americans a very literal statement. Guatemala, for example, survived a civil war that lasted from 1960 to 1996 and which killed more than 200,000 people, mainly indigenous Maya. In Guatemala, "the entire history of *la violencia* [the civil war] can be read as a war against memory, an Orwellian falsification of memory, a falsification of reality...This has entailed the cultivation of 'historical amnesia'...[as] a means for social control because it...furnishes a

base for [the] undisputed triumph of official ideology” (Zur 1998:159). To remember outside the state narrative was to invite danger, sometimes death.

Costa Rica’s past engenders a different kind of danger. Its national myth is one of a pure, violence-free utopia that moved easily through colonialism, rendering the independent nation a *demoperfectocracia* in which everyone gets along, everyone is protected by the welfare state, everyone is white (but see below), and everything is pretty good, particularly in comparison to the rest of Central America. This does not mean that people do not complain: they do, and do so vociferously, particularly about government scandals, corruption, and lack of investment in infrastructure and poverty reduction programs, all of which are everyday news stories. The myth is not accurate, but it is powerful. What it does is make the past seem like a place that left no violent or dangerous legacy, and which left Costa Rica alone as the superior moral, economic, and political power in Central America. Rather than grappling with differing articulations of the past, with its ramifications for present-day inequality and racism, many Costa Ricans have been content to sit back and congratulate themselves on a job well done, presuming that the hard work is already done and that the status quo is just fine as it is.

The moment of danger here, then, is not in risking bodily harm, or state-sponsored amnesia, but rather in contradicting this narrative and the resulting political lethargy that accompanies it. It is a conception of the past that is only possible because Costa Rican, and more specifically Orosian, identity is tightly circumscribed, narrowly conceived to leave out the ugly, difficult bits – including the people who contradict the idea of the nation as comprised solely of white descendants of Spaniards. It is an identity that encompasses only the Central Valley, where coffee was the predominant occupation after independence; the country’s four corners are left out of this vision. They include, not coincidentally, geographical as well as phenotypical distinctions from the Central Valley. Guanacaste to the

northwest,<sup>30</sup> and Sarapiquí and Tortuguero to the northeast, are hot and dry, mainly unsuitable for coffee, while Talamanca to the southeast is nothing but rugged mountains and the Osa peninsula in the southwest is such a wild jungle that the tourism minister recently got lost while hiking there. From the vantage point of the Central Valley, these regions are ignored politically, economically, and mythically. In essence, the closer one is geographically to San José, the greater one's access to these sources of power, and the greater the likelihood in being included in nation-building projects, whether they be dams or roads or bridges or narratives of belonging.

Even with this elision of indigeneity from the narration of history, “whiteness” is not the correct term to describe the dominant Costa Rican racial sense-of-self, but neither is it the *mestizaje*, or mixing, found in Mexico or Chile (Cahn 2008; Ferry 2005; Guadarrama Olivera and Franco 2005; Landes 2006; Winn 2004). It is also distinct from the Guatemalan category of *ladino* –



**Image 5: Indigenous man grinding coffee**  
The caption reads: “The Indians of Cartago used the *pilón* to prepare coffee for personal use. This primitive system is still practiced in many towns in Costa Rica.”  
Year unknown. Source: Costa Rican National Archives.

<sup>30</sup> As I will discuss further in the fifth chapter, Guanacaste plays an interesting role in Costa Rican national identity. The province voluntarily left Nicaragua and joined Costa Rica in 1856, and the day of its annexation, July 25, is celebrated as a national holiday. It maintains a “cowboy” image, but its Nicoya Peninsula is home to some of the best beaches and surfing in Costa Rica, and if foreign tourists are to visit only one part of the country, it is usually Nicoya. Although being *guanacasteco* is a source of pride for Guanacaste residents, many Central Valley Costa Ricans look down on *guanacastecos* as “*nicas regaladas*”, as one interlocutor put it – “gifted Nicaraguans.” The implication is that Guanacastecans are better than Nicaraguans because they chose to become Costa Rican, but they are still Nicaraguan at heart. The idea of Costa Rica as a country descended exclusively from white Spaniards plays out quite differently in Guanacaste and in the other “corners” of the country, where black and indigenous descent is impossible to ignore.

there, *ladinos* are imagined, accurately or not, as the pure descendants of Spaniards. Though of course few claim this heritage, it is nonetheless a racial and ethnic category oppositional to *indígena*, indigenous; in Guatemala, there is no room for *mestizaje* (Benson and Fischer 2007; Ehlers 2000; Jonas 2000; Manz 2004). Costa Ricans do not call themselves white (*blanco*), reserving that term for North Americans and Europeans, but they certainly do not consider themselves *mestizos*. When asked, one person simply replied that they are *ticos* – Costa Ricans.

In this chapter I look at the narratives of belonging to the nation and the past that circulate in Orosi, close enough to San José to access its power and resources, but not so close that it has lost the rural character that its residents prize. In Orosi, the primary unit of identification is the family, around which social life is still organized. In the last chapter, I will look at the challenges that the town has faced in adjusting to a non-agricultural way of life, where family labor has been largely replaced by Nicaraguan migrants and where it is not so easy to draw the lines of belonging as rigidly as before. This instability has caused many to call upon the past to provide stability and predictability, even though its lessons are not fully applicable to the present day. Here, I focus on the way in which life was lived and imagined prior to the 1980s – the memories that are flashing up in the contemporary moment of danger (Benjamin 1968), when ground that once seemed so stolid and predictable has become volatile and uncertain.

### ***Nostalgia for an Idealized Past***

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I interviewed more than two dozen people over the age of 25 during the spring and summer of 2012. These interviews took place almost exclusively in their homes, perched on the edges of couches, sipping on coffee or fresh fruit juice as they told me about their lives during the height of coffee production, before cell phones, before tourism, and in some cases before the arrival of ICE, the Costa Rican Electricity Institute, which built a hydroelectric plant and dam in the Valley in the 1960s. The main theme that cut across age and gender was that things used to be better: that life might have been

physically harder, the diet less varied, but overall, it was better. I look at two particularly salient aspects of memory and recollection: the idea that everyone belonged, and the organization of domestic life around coffee.

It seemed like whenever I asked an Orosian about the history of their town, they began with the same sentence: "*La iglesia fue construida en 1743.*" (The [Catholic] church was built in 1743.) The church is today the driving force behind the town's domestic tourism and is also the site of weddings, funerals, and Mass. According to guidebooks<sup>31</sup> and the church's own small museum, it is the oldest continually operating church in Costa Rica. The church's history was seen as equivalent to the town's history, and people were fond of telling me about the material used to build and repair it, legends about why it faced east instead of west,<sup>32</sup> and why the statue of Joseph was so special.<sup>33</sup>

Although Orosians were proud of the church as both a religious place of worship and a tourist attraction, they did not seem to connect the church's reason for being with the town's indigenous past. The church's construction might have marked the beginning of "Orosi" for most people, but although

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<sup>31</sup> An image of the church appears on the back of several editions of Lonely Planet. It is also listed in their section on Orosi and the Orosi Valley.

<sup>32</sup> The story goes that it was built by indigenous Cabecars, converted Catholics who accompanied a Franciscan priest who had fled the Talamanca region southeast of Orosi in 1735, taking with him an image of San José (Joseph). Someone – either the Cabecars, Joseph, a nun in Spain, or Jesus himself – told this priest to find a paradise along a river, below the mountains, with green flora and many birds. This paradise was Orosi, and it was here that the priest built a church. The priest ordered the Cabecars to build the church facing west, in the traditional Catholic style; doing so would also ensure that San José did not have to look back with regret at the place he had fled. The image kept disappearing, however, and would be discovered in buildings that faced to the east. After several disappearances and reappearances, and the possible burning of one of the original churches (Macho told me that "drunken Indians burned the first one down"), the priest finally gave in and built the church with the entrance facing east, towards the river and the distant Talamancan mountains. It is today the only church in Costa Rica known to face east.

<sup>33</sup> It is special for two reasons: one, it resists movement, and two, it is understood to be a perfect depiction of the actual Joseph. José told me that during Holy Week one year, they wanted to move the statue so they could put up something for Jesus. After the mass, they found that they couldn't lift it, which, though made of wood, is not so large that it cannot be moved by human strength. The priest and several parishioners had to talk to San José to convince him that he was not being stolen before he would consent to being (temporarily) moved. As for the depiction, the top part of the statue has been delicately carved, but the bottom seems unfinished. "It is unfinished," Caro, the artist, said. "One night Jesus came to the sculptor and asked how he had been able to sculpt his father (Joseph) so perfectly. The sculptor was so astonished that he died of fright, and the statue was never finished." Finally, the statue is missing a finger; thieves stole it, Caro said, and the finger bled. Joseph used to be holding a baby Jesus, which was also stolen, and before the theft his arms would droop as though he was tired of holding the child. But they stole the baby "and now he no longer gets tired."

they mentioned the indigenous Cabecars and Huetars present in the area at the time, there was a disconnect between those populations and the people who lived in Orosi today. This disjuncture was mirrored in the small museum attached to the church: though it, like Lonely Planet, claimed the church as the oldest continually operating in Costa Rica, there were nevertheless several long gaps in the timeline on display in the entry, when both church and town seem to have been abandoned. No explanation was offered for how the church could have been both out of regular use, and yet the oldest in continual use in the country.<sup>34</sup>

### **Outside the Imaginary: Invisibility and Belonging in the Past**

Caro and I spoke for more than four hours about the town's history, particularly its indigenous past. She was active in Costa Rica's equivalent of Boy and Girl Scouts, and grew very excited when she learned that I had been a Girl Scout, too. For her, much of Scouting revolved around the importance of maintaining indigenous traditions: learning about plants and their uses, how to build fires and find shelter in the woods, how to be in touch with nature. Most people weren't interested in this kind of education for their children, she said; they didn't see the point. Not only did they not see the use of learning how to find fresh water in a part of the country where even the dry season is quite wet, they were uncomfortable with the very idea that indigenous populations had anything to do with them.

Caro thought that the problem her family and neighbors had with accepting that most of them had indigenous Cabecar and Huetar ancestors was because it was impossible to separate the religious from the indigenous history. This is problematic in a Roman Catholic country, she told me, "because of course, they [the Cabecars and Huetars] weren't Catholic." For her, the problem centered on the issue of religion: she thought it was the key component to Costa Rican exceptionalism, particularly in Orosi. But the reluctance to discuss the past in terms of its indigenous populations, or to allow them to be a part of one's personal and parochial history, was more than just trouble with non-Catholic religious

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<sup>34</sup> I suspect it involves a generous interpretation of the words "continual" and "continuous."



practice, or with reconciling Christian teachings of loving thy neighbor with colonial violence. It meant amplifying the vision of who was and is Costa Rican to include non-Spanish ancestors. And while Costa Ricans do not, as mentioned earlier, generally claim whiteness as their racial identity, nor do they lay claims to *mestizaje*. Something had happened between the arrival of the white Spanish conquerors in the sixteenth century and the present day to create a nation of people who were neither white nor mixed, but Orosians preferred either to leave the details unexamined or to relegate them to a foggy, distant past where they could not make any claims upon the present.

A few days earlier I had spoken with Estela, who owns a small *soda* (family restaurant). Like almost all of Orosi's businesses, her family home was directly behind the *soda*, and it was staffed entirely by family members who came in and out of the restaurant during our conversation. "My grandfather was an Indian," Estela told me; she added that he didn't even speak Spanish. Estela is in her fifties, meaning that her grandfather was born sometime around the turn of the twentieth century. According to her, he lived in the hills and did not like mixing with the Spanish-speaking population that dominated the valley floor. She told me that she was one of the only people who would admit to being indigenous, though "everyone here is part Indian." Indeed, Estela was the only person I interviewed who acknowledged indigenous ancestry. To be fair, she was also the only one who offered this information: the tension around the topic was so palpable that it was not a question I felt I could ask. It was not that the question was rude, exactly, or that people denied having indigenous heritage. Rather, Indian-ness and indigeneity were not even considered to be part of the contemporary story of Costa Rican identity. After dozens of conversations I got the sense that Orosians, with very few exceptions, saw themselves as many U.S. Americans do today: Indian-ness was something that happened before we arrived. The Indians were all sent to live elsewhere, and now we are here on what was once their land but which is now ours. Those of us alive today are not related to them. There is a shame to indigeneity that is deeply felt, even in a town that proudly lays claim to the oldest church in the country.

Stories like Estela's, and the evidence of mining disputes from the late 1800s, road disputes from the early 1800s, and the phenotype of many families suggests that these two pasts are not as separate as my interlocutors would have me believe. Juan, in his early twenties, explained the history of indigeneity in Costa Rica as one of "invisibilization." It is not a word in Spanish, either, but he thought it should be: the process of making something or someone invisible. This was due in part, he thought, to the lack of material culture that was left behind by pre-Columbian inhabitants. As described in chapter one, the Spanish who arrived in the late 1500s met a relatively small population that fled to the rugged hills that ringed the Central Valley, leaving the farmland to the conquerors. There are no grand monuments as there are elsewhere in Mexico and Central America, and no written records to give clues to their social organization.

A few weeks later Kenneth brought his cousin along on one of our interviews. The conversation moved back and forth in time as the interviewee, José, told us how the town had changed during his fifty or so years. Kenneth and his cousin had heard most of the stories from their own parents, but occasionally there were references that were lost on them but intelligible to me – that the large La Sabana park in San José had once been the airport, or that the government had an official newspaper, *La Gaceta*, in which all laws had to be published before going into effect. José looked pleased with my knowledge, and apparently decided that I knew enough to be allowed in on his secret. At the end of our conversation he looked out the windows of his house to be sure no one was watching. He then went into a back room and returned with three clay figurines. Kenneth and his cousin looked surprised, and Kenneth told me later that he hadn't known the figurines existed until then.

"These are from the time of the Indians," José said, handing them over carefully, "maybe even from before the Spaniards." Even with my limited archaeological knowledge, I could tell that the pieces were old and in excellent condition. Before I could say anything about preservation, national heritage, or the like, José said, "By law, they should be in the museum here. But if they were in the museum they

would be stolen. Everything else has been stolen out of that museum. It used to be so beautiful. Now it is just a few dusty things no one wants. A lot of it went to San José [to the national museums] and the rest people took.” He told me that very few people know he has them, and that he tried to keep them clean and safe and protected, that he thought he was doing a better job than the church museum, where artifacts sit in ragged, dusty rows. The walls of his home were filled with Catholic iconography, including palm leaves left over from Easter celebrations, but from the care with which he handled the figurines, I got the sense that he felt the statues can have feelings, and can act on those feelings.

These three interactions comprise the entirety of my conversations with Orosians about indigeneity and indigenous heritage in the town. For everyone else, the town’s history begins with the colonial church and then jumps immediately to a time within reachable memory. For the oldest residents, this is about the late 1800s, accessed via stories told to them by their grandparents when they were young. The stories do not vary greatly until the arrival of ICE in the 1960s: anything before that seems to almost have occurred out of time, or at least, in the haziness of a past where dates did not matter terribly, because there was no reason to mark the passage of time or to differentiate one part of the past from any other part.

### **Invisibilizing the Present**

Beginning in the 1980s, two groups began moving to Costa Rica in large numbers. The first was comprised of expatriates from the Global North, while the second group’s members were Nicaraguans seeking economic opportunity and freedom from violence. The first group, predominately white and relatively wealthy, presented relatively few challenges to the imagined community (but see chapter six for some of the challenges brought by tourism and expatriates). Nicaraguans, however, are generally darker-skinned, with more overtly indigenous features than the majority of Costa Ricans in the Central Valley, and those who come to Costa Rica are overwhelmingly poor and desperate. The majority began arriving in the early 1980s, fleeing the Sandinista revolution and the Contra repression that soon

followed, but as Nicaragua continues to be an impoverished country with few opportunities, they continue to arrive in large numbers seeking work, and in a few cases education, even though the immediate fear of physical violence is past (Hayden 2003; Lancaster 1992; Sandoval-García 2004).<sup>35</sup> Nicaraguans as a group are imagined to be outside the community: through newspapers, TV, and social media articles and discussions they are saddled with presumptions of violence, criminality, illiteracy, and failure to contribute to the greater good through taxation – all seen as antithetical to what it means to be a true Costa Rican.

Though I had very few conversations about indigeneity in Oroquieta, I had many about Nicaraguans. The rhetoric surrounding coffee, identity, modernity, and social change is deeply raced, as darker-skinned Nicaraguan migrant workers are unfairly blamed for the country's problems even as they maintain what is left of the coffee industry. Yet Costa Ricans themselves do not fully understand the ways in which their interactions with Nicaraguans, and coffee more generally, are raced and gendered (Landes 1945). For example, during a conversation about coffee picking and the replacement of family labor with paid migrant workers, Alejandra told me that she didn't know any Nicaraguans well, but the ones she did know were ungrateful (*desagradecidos*) for what Costa Rica provided them – work, education for their children, medical care. She felt badly, she said, that life is so hard there, but thought that this did not give them license to complain about Costa Rica; they should just be glad to be here, no matter what they have to put up with. If they didn't like it, they should just go back to Nicaragua. She ended the conversation, which took place during a stroll through coffee fields, by telling me that there were no poor Costa Ricans. A map of poverty in Costa Rica, she said, was really just a map of where the Nicaraguans lived, and if they were to go back home, Costa Rica would be better off. Nicaraguans made

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<sup>35</sup> In February 2014 I had a conversation with a Nicaraguan who is now living in Honduras, where he manages a coffee farm. He said that as in Costa Rica, many of the itinerant coffee pickers in Honduras are Nicaraguan. "If all the Nicaraguans are in Costa Rica and Honduras," I asked, half-joking, "who is left in Nicaragua?" "The politicians," he said, completely serious. "They're the only ones who can afford it. They just sit back and get fat off the state."

everything dirty, and not only did they take from state resources, "*nos quitan el aire*," she said. They use up/take away all our air.

Alejandra was not alone in her vehemence and scorn. The town is bordered on either side by large *fincas*, coffee farms, that thirty years earlier had been broken up among several different owners. The current owners have spent the past three decades buying up surrounding land in order to create these large *fincas* that require a year-round labor force as well as the migrant workers brought in during the harvest. That labor force is, so far as I could determine, entirely comprised of Nicaraguans, and they live in small, humble homes out in the fields, relatively far outside of town. A few others live in even more humble shacks close to the river, a sharp contrast to the neat, well-maintained middle-class homes that make up the town center. Whenever I asked about either the field workers or the shacks, I was told that they "were not in Orosi." Surprised, I would press the issue, sketching out a map with a finger or on a scrap paper. "That's [the town of] Río Macho," I said, pointing to the south, "and then [the town of] Jucó. If these fields aren't in Orosi, where are they?" I did the same thing with the shacks, where there was even less geographic wriggle room. "If this is Orosi," I would say, pointing to the north, "and *this* is Orosi" – pointing to the south – "then what's this here between Orosi and the river [to the east]?" Nowhere, was usually the answer. Or it was somewhere, but it was not Orosi. Sometimes I got a shrug. It did not matter what the lines on maps said: Nicaraguans did not live in Orosi. I was told, wrongly, on multiple occasions that they did not even come to Orosi during the harvest, that all the pickers were Costa Rican.

The process of making people and ideas invisible is a spatial and geographic one, where they are imagined to be outside of the physical and narrative community despite very visible evidence to the contrary. Writing about the Apache, Basso (1996:6) argues that place-making "is a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of 'what happened here.'" In Orosi, it is about constructing particular versions of "what happened here," but it is also about what did *not* happen, or

who does not belong. Nicaraguans, like their indigenous forebears, are so strongly imagined as outside the physical confines of Orosi that people were willing to redraw borders to keep them excluded, to create gaps in place as well as in time.

### **“Communism Lived In Orosi”**

In a small volume published in 1974 by a Spanish Franciscan priest, entitled *Orosi: Su historia y su paisaje* (Orosi: Its history and landscape), the author writes that “before Russia created communes, before the...philosophies of Hegel and Marx, communism lived in Orosi, founded on evangelical principles” (Mateos Lopez 1974:25). While this statement, like the rest of the book, feels overly enthusiastic, there is no doubt that there is a strong sense of community and communal obligation in Orosi, and that it was once, according to my interlocutors, even stronger. One of the major changes cited was that residents no longer all knew each other, that there were faces they did not recognize in the streets. Some of those faces, people readily admitted, belonged to foreign tourists. Others were members of Orosi families that had simply grown too large for those who were not immediate neighbors to keep track of. Occasionally, Costa Ricans from other parts of the country would move to Orosi, usually to work in tourism. And during the coffee harvest, the unrecognized and unrecognizable faces belonged to migrant harvesters, almost exclusively Nicaraguans and indigenous Panamanians.

Whoever the unknown faces belonged to, intimate knowledge of one’s fellow residents was not all that was missing in the present day. Carmen, who was forty-eight years old at the time of our interview in 2012, said that she would like to return to the old days. “It was very beautiful. If we could go back in time, I would like to do so” (*Era muy bonito. Si pudiéramos retroceder, me gustaría hacerlo*). I asked what it was like back then, and what it was she missed so much. Her answer echoed that of many others of her generation. “There was no malice, like there is today. We played in the coffee fields, in the pastures. You only had to be afraid of the dead, not the living. At 5:30 everyone went home, there

wasn't any electricity.<sup>36</sup> Cooking, cleaning was a lot of work back then, not like now when there are machines to do everything. Before getting married we lived in a wood house – well, I guess you could call it that, but you could poke the wall and your finger would go straight through!" Though she acknowledged that physically, her life was easier now than it was then, she lamented, as did so many others, the changes that had been wrought to Orosi's social landscape.

One day I spoke with Evaristo, who was 76. He had been a farmer and then worked at the church for many years, and his initial response to my question about what Orosi used to be like was to describe the materials and process used for building and repairing the church. We sat on a bench outside the house where he lives with his daughter and her family, watching the neighbors walk past through the metal fencing that surrounds almost every house in Orosi, and indeed, almost every house in Costa Rica. Evaristo pointed out that the supporting walls for his fence were different from those of everyone else – they were decorated with colorful mosaics that people had laughed at him for creating. He had made them all out of found materials, using them to strengthen the *bahareque*.<sup>37</sup> His walls, he told me, would be standing long after their cheap concrete had fallen down. Although he was animated while describing the construction of the walls, his enthusiasm faded as he looked again at the metal fencing. "Today, everyone is locked up in their houses, like they're in jail." Before, there was no need for fences – there was nothing to steal. The streets were earthen, and cows and pigs wandered through them. Paddocks lined the streets that were now filled with houses. Despite this poverty, which Evaristo described as "immense," the town slowly grew prosperous, but because of the small population, and the fact that everyone was related to each other, the prosperity was just as equally distributed as the poverty had been. Everyone was poor, but they were equally poor, so it didn't matter.

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<sup>36</sup> Costa Rica is in Central Standard Time and does not observe daylight savings. For most of the year it is dark by 6pm, and during the winter, darkness sets in a little after 5. Because of its proximity to the Equator, there is a very short period of dusk – the sky changes quickly from full sun to full dark.

<sup>37</sup> *Bahareque* is a building material similar to adobe, and was the primary material used in the construction of the church. According to Evaristo all the houses in Orosi used to be made of *bahareque*, but people "got tired of the old things" and replaced them with concrete and steel and tin roofs.

For a long time, Evaristo said, people grew everything they needed. There were several dairies, and the fertile landscape produced corn and beans in addition to the milk and cheese from the cattle. The only thing that had to be purchased was salt, and later rice. Before, you could taste the cow when you were eating meat – now, he said sadly, everything tastes like hormones. Before, when people got married, people did everything to help them get started – they made them beds, built them a house. It was a very poor but a very good way to live (*era una muy pobre pero muy buena forma de vivir*). People had *educación* (the word means both “education” in a formal sense and “manners” or “knowledge of how to behave”). “That you’re poor and humble, that’s fine, but you should have education,” he said, implying that this was what was lacking today – that young people no longer learn how to work, how to behave in society (*ni aprenden a trabajar, a entrar en la sociedad*). The last thing he told me was that today, there is a lot of vice and a lot of *vagabundeando* – vagabonding, or aimless hanging out, often with the implication of low-level criminal activity – and that you never used to see such a thing in the town. Both Carmen and Evaristo’s sentiments and recollections were repeated by everyone over the age of about 40.

### **ICE and Education**

The relative simplicity of life, and the reliance on agriculture and by extension, family changed abruptly when ICE, the *Instituto Costarricense de la Electricidad* or Costa Rican Electricity Institute, arrived in the 1960s. During that decade, ICE built a dam on the north end of the Valley, across the river in the town of Cachí, as well as a hydroelectric plant on the southern end, closer to Orosi in the small town of Río Macho. Working in conjunction with AyA (*Acueductos y Alcantarillados* – the Costa Rica Water and Sanitation Institute), the power plant was fed by a reservoir in the surrounding hills, and the two agencies constructed a series of pipelines that eventually brought running water not only to the Valley, but all the way to San José. ICE, as a government monopoly, is mandated to bring electricity and now, telecommunications to the entire country, regardless of how remote or unprofitable the location.



At the time, Orosi was relatively isolated despite its proximity to Cartago and San José. In order to build the dam and the plant, and in order to have a steady supply of workers, the state, through ICE, built roads and bridges that finally connected the two halves of the Valley for vehicles, rather than just pedestrians. It also built schools and brought in teachers to staff them; many of these schools were for the children of workers, but there were also special adult schools built as part of ICE's offices.

The ICE schools did not only focus on power plant management or hydroengineering. According to the male interlocutors with whom I spoke, ICE taught them to read and write, to think critically, and to plan future projects. Victor, who has worked for ICE for 43 years and is nearing retirement, told me quite emphatically that ICE put Orosi on the map, that prior to ICE Orosi was a town of few resources and now it had many. Joaquín told me that he had worked for ICE for 35 years and only recently retired, with a government pension. "We didn't have any way to study back then, but ICE gave us capacitation,"<sup>38</sup> it helped us out. With ICE you could really do well [economically], but not now. Well, in comparison to other jobs, I guess you can still do well. It was the best job here, with all the government benefits and guarantees." Victor corroborated this analysis, adding that ICE prepared "the people and the town for development." But, he added, pointing at the thinly-graveled road outside his house, marked by ruts and potholes, "people have not taken advantage of this so that Orosi can be how it should be. People don't contribute" (*la gente no se ha aprovechado para que sea Orosi como debe ser. La gente no contribuye*).

Victor, like others, complained about ICE taking more from Orosi (in terms of natural resources; see chapter six) than it gave back, but ended by saying that ICE was "a first quality institution. It is one of the best businesses in Costa Rica," noting that it had managed to bring electricity into even remote

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<sup>38</sup> Capacitation, or *capacitación*, is a word I heard frequently throughout my fieldwork. It refers to any kind of formal training, from workshops to lectures to classes. People were always rescheduling meetings and interviews with me because they had to attend a *capacitación*.

places where the investment could never be recouped.<sup>39</sup> “Look how everything here is yellow [ICE’s color]. We owe everything to ICE.” This was not an exaggeration. In addition to constructing roads, bridges, and schools, ICE provided the first in-town cash alternative to coffee production. It employed women as teachers and cooks for the cafeteria, and it seems like every male of working age in the 1960s and 1970s had worked for ICE in some capacity. Because the plant and the dam needed employees twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, schedules were flexible. Additionally, the presence of both the dam and the power plant meant that many Orosians had been *capacitado* (trained) beyond that of the average employee of the time, so they were often sent to work on other projects for several weeks; when they returned, they would have a week or more off.

Most importantly, this flexibility meant that it was possible to both work full-time for ICE and to continue working in coffee, a plant which does not require daily maintenance. That is, coffee moved from being a primary occupation to a secondary one, and according to my interlocutors, men started spending much less time in the fields than they once had. Nonetheless, although they were not paying quite so much attention to their plants, their buyers did not seem to notice or care. In the 1970s and into the 1980s Orosi coffee was still being sold on the conventional market, where anything roughly brown and caffeinated was acceptable. Rather than having to live off coffee, it could be treated as an extra, a relatively lucrative bonus that, when combined with the stability of government salaries, paid vacation and sick leave. The result was that Orosi as a community was able to do quite well financially during this era. The humble houses beloved by Evaristo were replaced with modern materials, and the roads meant that cars and buses were suddenly present in the Valley. The cars were still few and far between, and television did not arrive until the 1970s, but these two decades are remembered as a

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<sup>39</sup> Because it is a government entity, ICE is required by law to provide electricity and phone lines everywhere in the country, even in remote areas where very few people live and where it is very expensive to provide service. They are not allowed to charge remote customers more than anyone else. Victor, along with several other ICE employees, told me that this was why it was better to have services like electricity as part of the public, common good, rather than in the hands of private investors who would either not bother to reach those customers, or would charge much higher rates.

period of great prosperity and tranquility, as well as a time of rising expectations in terms of both material wealth and educational achievement.

It was the beginning of a shift away from the humble *campesino* lifestyle, where it did not matter how thin the walls were so long as they were keeping the family in out of the rain, and where everyone was equally poor. The walls of houses are thicker now, and the roofs have been extended to cover automobiles and motorcycles. Multiple cell phone towers are visible from almost any point in town, blocking some of the view of the coffee fields but offering consistent mobile and data service. Though as we will see in the last chapter, most people laud the town's improved connectivity, it has also been a site of struggle, first in the 1980s (below) and again in the 2010s (chapter six).



**Image 6: ICE Office in Paraíso**

Blue and yellow are ICE's colors. This sign is outside an ICE office in Paraíso that does much of the necessary office work for running hydroelectric power. The sign reads, "Welcome to the [Power] Generation Center RIOCAT. We generate electricity to support the economic and social development of the country."

## Orosi Colonial

While ICE continues to be the town's largest employer, even in the 1980s it could not absorb the entirety of a growing labor force that was slowly being redirected away from coffee by the opportunities offered by increasing education and access to Cartago and San José. Local businesses were also not up to the challenge. Even today, decades later, there are small branches of the national bank and health service in town, a few dentists and retail shops, but there are no professional offices, no lawyers or architects, nowhere near enough employment for everyone. In the absence of local alternatives, Orosians began to commute to the provincial capital of Cartago or to San José in search of work, leaving behind their families for the day in order to find employment.

Tourism seemed to provide an easy alternative to the long commute. Because of the colonial church and a number of natural hot springs, Orosi long had been a rural tourism destination for Costa Ricans, but it was not until the 1980s that it had a significant impact on the local economy. Working with ICT, the *Instituto Costarricense del Turismo* or National Tourism Institute, local business leaders implemented the "Orosi Colonial" campaign in 1986, focusing on the town's natural beauty and its allegedly unbroken ties to a romanticized version of the colonial period. With ICT providing money for materials, Gerardo, one of the Orosi Colonial leaders, told me that locals were encouraged to repaint their homes in "rustic colors" and to take down exterior elements that did not conform to colonial style. The campaign was pronounced a resounding success, putting Orosi on the local and international tourist map. Eventually, however, the money ran out and non-colonial elements crept back in to the landscape – trucks in tiny garages, satellite dishes, and paint colors from Sherwin-Williams that would have been unimaginable in 1743. As the town has grown, it became more difficult to agree on a vision for the role of tourism. The tourism board has splintered into several groups, none of which seem to be effective, and the two men once in charge of Orosi Colonial are now bitter enemies, each wielding significant, and oppositional, clout.

Orosi Colonial was quite literally a postcard vision of the past, repainting the town to fit with an ideal of how things used to be. Even young adults who could not have remembered a pre-Orosi Colonial moment expressed this nostalgia to me, decrying the town's growth, its increasing anonymity, and what they see as a focus on material goods instead of families and values. Orosi Colonial was even then about a return to a simpler time, namely, the period from the 1940s-1970s, when the first national social welfare reforms had been implemented but before people had begun leaving agriculture. It was also when Costa Rica was, in their minds, truly Costa Rican and foreigners, Nicaraguan and gringo alike, were practically unknown.

Ironically, this nostalgic postcard image has been used, both literally and figuratively, to "sell" Orosi as a tourist destination, bringing about further change. In 1996 the Spanish language school and hostel opened in town; Sara and Toine purchased it two years later. Through its glowing write-up in Lonely Planet, the town hosted a few thousand international tourists every year, and businesses promoted it with the slogan "No beach, no problem." The 2009 edition of Lonely Planet's Costa Rica guide even pictured the church on its back cover. Orosians who were teenagers or older at the time remember this as the start of the real tourism boom in Orosi; what had been a trickle of foreigners became a steady, dependable stream of backpackers eager to hike the coffee fields and to see the "real" Costa Rica, unexploited by foreign hotel and fast-food chains. Until the economic crisis of 2008, tourism provided a living for hundreds of small business owners. They opened restaurants, hotels and hostels, worked in transportation, sold handicrafts, and offered adventure sports, such as four-wheeling, white-water rafting, ziplining, horseback riding, and even paintball. Nearby Tapantí National Park, where some scenes from *Jurassic Park* were filmed, drew birdwatchers and hikers. Orosi became the jumping-off point for travelers who wanted to visit nearby volcanoes Irazú and Turrialba and who didn't want to stay in San José, which figures extremely negatively in the guidebooks. The postcard had done its work, and

Costa Rica's international popularity had done the rest. Entrepreneurs did not need to advertise on their own or do much more than hang a sign on the main road: if you built it, they would come.

Rather than having to commute, tourism allowed people to live and work in town, to set their own hours and to be their own bosses, much as they once had as full-time agriculturalists. They could still be proud, yet humble, and their families could stay together. Because Orosi had not been the target of foreign development like many of the beach towns, the hotels and restaurants were locally owned and operated, meaning that tourist dollars stayed in town. While Orosi Colonial could not be resurrected, nonetheless the image of Orosi as a tranquil, peaceful, "authentic" Costa Rican destination had been remarkably effective in drawing in tourists. Although the town had grown, it had not changed nearly as drastically as other hot spots: unlike Jacó, where locals had been driven out by rising condominiums, or Arenal, where they had fled ahead of rising prices, Orosi was comparatively unchanged by the tourism boom. After all, tourism in Orosi was about preserving the past, even if it was an idealized, whitewashed, non-foreign, postcard version of the past.

## ***Kinship and Obligation Under Coffee***

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### **Family and Social Life**

Until the 1990s, coffee was the backbone of life in Orosi. It shaped and was shaped by kinship obligations, further binding families together and to the land. Because of the division of labor between farming and processing, it was possible for Orosians to take advantage of the opportunities offered by ICE beginning in the 1960s and to work in both coffee and for the electric company, sharply raising standards of living, strengthening Orosi's ties to the capital, and creating a generation of parents who now expected their children to finish high school and, if possible, university as well. Because of Orosi's relative remoteness, later alleviated by ICE's roads, its large family size, and the lack of any political structures within the town, it also was the central force in imagining community. That is, when a problem arose that normally would go to the municipality – bad roads, burst pipes, issues with garbage

removal – people did not (and do not, for a variety of reasons) look to the mayor up in Paraíso to effect change. Rather, they looked to their neighbors, who were also relatives, to make the necessary improvements. It was a system that worked so long as everyone stayed on good terms with their families and so long as strangers did not move in. But then coffee prices dropped, and those children who would have once helped on the farm were now in school. Agriculture, an occupation that had once held the pride of independent work and decision-making, increasingly became the realm of migrant Nicaraguan workers. Families relied on each other socially, but once they were no longer in coffee, or saw it as less of a calling and more of a job (see chapter three), they no longer had the same need to rely on each other to make enough money to make it through the year.

Despite these changes, or perhaps because of them, family remains today the central organizing unit in social life. Neighborhoods are named for the families that inhabit them, and sons and daughters who have moved to Cartago (15 kilometers away) or to San José (30km to the city limits) are seen as having gone very far away indeed, even though most try to come back every weekend. Sundays are for family, so much so that the town's streets are practically deserted; those who are not in someone's home or at the *balneario* or a *rancho* are generally the tourists. The *rancho*, in particular, is a popular family destination. *Rancho* means "ranch," and implies a home on a large tract of land, surrounded by domesticated animals and fields under production. There are few *ranchos* in Orosi that can come close to this ideal; they are more likely to be a small, grassy space and a pavilion or simple cabin, sometimes with electricity. The importance of the *rancho* is not its luxury but rather that it is a shared space where the family can gather together, as most families are too large to fit everyone in the living or dining room of someone's house. Some *ranchos* are on the edges of town, heading up into the mountains, while others are hidden on neighborhood streets or along the river. On the weekends they are crowded with family members, cooking on grills or opening coolers and slow cookers filled with food made at home and brought to share. The music is loud and tends towards *reggaeton*, a style I can only describe as

interminably thumping, or to *ranchera*, a sort of country-oldies-romantic ballad hybrid popular with older generations and with dating couples.

I actually first began investigating kinship and obligation not by asking about coffee, but by trying to understand a vegetable stand. Orosi's main street, perhaps eight blocks long, consists of three grocery stores and three vegetable stands; the grocery stores also sell vegetables. The vegetables are all grown locally, and on any given day one can find ripe bananas, potatoes, pineapple, tomatoes, avocados, lettuce, green onions, a variety of peppers, *chayote* (a kind of squash), *pejibaye* (peach palm), water apples, limes, *cas* (a citrus fruit), green beans, mangoes, and any number of other fruits and vegetables that would take the rest of this page to list. Jorge did not call Orosi a land blessed by God for nothing. Despite this bounty, one of the vegetable stands consistently has the worst selection and the highest prices. It is near the other stands, so location could not be the explanation, yet each year when I returned expecting it to have gone out of business there it would be, selling the same limp lettuce and overripe avocados. How could it possibly stay in business when it had so much competition?

It took me several years to answer this question. Not knowing exactly who was related to whom by blood or marriage, I never asked any Orosi natives about that stand specifically,<sup>40</sup> but I did pose general questions about businesses and the limits of familial obligation. In general, the answer I received was that though the town had grown rapidly in the past few decades, the majority of residents in and around the main streets still knew each other, and knew each other's family histories and connections. Family members were essentially obligated to shop at businesses owned by their extended kin, even if those stores had less selection or higher prices. If they were to shop at a competitor, the action would be noted, and eventually passed on to the owners, leading to familial discord. And because social life

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<sup>40</sup> I did, however, ask expatriates what they thought of it, and they also expressed their surprise that it continued to remain in business year after year. It was during these conversations that the idea that kinship obligations could be the explanation first arose.



was organized around family, with a seemingly never-ending parade of birthdays and anniversaries filling one's social calendar, this level of discord was to be avoided whenever possible, or at least saved for disputes that merited such.

Costs, moreover, were low, so that shop owners did not need to see the same kinds of returns that their counterparts in the United States required to stay in business. Except for the much larger grocery stores, all the shops in town were the front of houses that had long since been paid for. Very few people had mortgages, and though some rented out their homes or storefronts to others, it was a much less common arrangement than ownership. Store owners, therefore, needed only to make back the costs of electricity (low), buying the vegetables (extremely low, if they purchased them within the family), and enough to pay the (usually family) employees something for their time. These low barriers to entry explained why there were so many small shops that seemed like they should have gone out of business, either because they were rarely open or they sold the same thing as everyone else. None of them, however, were as overtly differentiated from their peers as the vegetable stand. I thought that perhaps I was just visiting the stand at the wrong times, when all the best produce had already been selected by others, but repeated visits at different times of different days make this unlikely. Another possibility is that the stand sold most of its product through other venues, such as through home delivery or to the market in Cartago, and the storefront only offered the leftovers in the hope that they could get something for them rather than throwing out the waste. After years of subtle questioning, the best explanation I can make for the stand's continued existence is that the owners seem to be related to about half the town, so the network of obligated purchasers is quite large.

In addition to keeping costs low, family networks also kept a downward pressure on unseemly upward mobility.<sup>41</sup> It was not that there is no sense of "keeping up with the Joneses" or desire for the

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<sup>41</sup> Additionally, anyone who seemed to have suddenly acquired material possessions – the money to build an addition to a house, or a new pickup truck – without a public explanation was rumored to be involved in narcotrafficking. In several cases it seemed that this was actually true, and several people complained bitterly that

newest cell phone model, because those desires were certainly present, particularly among younger Orosians, and particularly in recent years. But outdoing one's neighbor seems to be less appealing when that neighbor is your grandmother, or the cousin you grew up, both of whom probably know whether or not you can afford that new car. Neighborhoods, usually comprised of families, might set out to outcompete one another, particularly when it came to hosting religious events, but this was seen as a reasonable extension of the idea that the family comes first, or perhaps on equal footing with God. Every Easter, for example, one neighborhood puts up an arch under which parade goes – first mournful, on Ash Wednesday, and then joyful, on Easter morning – march. Another plays host to the crucified Jesus statue during the three days prior to the Resurrection, while neighbors hang white flags along what will become the parade route between the cemetery, host home, and the church. It is not just about who can perform their religious duties “better,” but also that what seems like the entire town turns out to parade along the route, taking note even in their religious observation of whose lawn or home is lacking upkeep, not to mention which homes can afford to make the donations to the church necessary to secure such an honor.

Family, too, was cited as the reason for staying in Orosi, even when it meant commuting more than two hours each way to San José on the bus for work or school. Everyone with whom I spoke, from young adults to those nearing retirement age, was united in their preference to stay in town, surrounded by family, rather than moving to the anonymity of even a small city like Cartago.<sup>42</sup> Those who did move away came back as often as they could, sometimes every weekend, in order to spend time with their families. They preferred the close-knit quiet of town life to an anonymous urban lifestyle, where “no one even greets you on the street,” María complained. “Here, everyone knows you, and if they don't, at least they greet you. No one does that in San José.” Greeting people in the street is a key

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the only way to make any money anymore was to get involved with drugs, since there were not enough well-paying jobs to be had.

<sup>42</sup> Of course, there was some selection bias here, as all but a few of the people I spoke with had chosen to stay in town rather than move elsewhere.

component of proper behavior, and it was one of the ways that I, otherwise indistinguishable from tourists, was able to demonstrate my knowledge of local customs. When out walking at the very least it is expected that you acknowledge another's presence through a lift of the head and a smile. Better yet is a spoken greeting, either *Buenos días* (good morning) or a simple *Buenas*, short for "good afternoon" but better translated as "good day." *Adiós* is also a common greeting in rural Costa Rica, with the "a" shortened so that it sounds more like *dios*. Though most people know it as the Spanish word for goodbye, *adiós* literally means "to God", and functions rather like a blessing. To not greet someone is considered very rude, and can be a way of demonstrating one's displeasure with another, essentially ignoring them in a public and visible manner. You are supposed to greet everyone you pass, interrupting your own conversations to do so; it is considered particularly rude to not greet elders. María's statement was true: whenever I traveled to the capital I had to forcibly stop myself from greeting strangers, since a *gringa* wishing them good day had the potential to be perceived as strange at best and offering an invitation I did not intend at worst.<sup>43</sup> When I went to Cartago with an Orosian, they would only greet people they recognized, who still comprised a sizeable portion of the population.

### **Independence and Self-Reliance**

The importance of family has its roots in Orosi's humble agricultural beginnings. Prior to ICE, just about everything that was eaten in the Valley was grown in the Valley, not only because it was so bountiful, but also because trudging the fifteen kilometers up the hill to Cartago, where there were markets with greater variety, was a task one undertook only out of necessity, particularly in the rainy season when the dirt paths turned to mud. Moreover, Xinia repeated Evaristo's comment about purchased food not tasting as good as that which you had grown yourself, but also stressed that it was hard but rewarding work to do it on your own. "There was none of this working for contracts," like there

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<sup>43</sup> On several occasions I had a direct flight from San José to Newark, from which I would then take the train to Penn Station. Waking up in Orosi and then walking down a sidewalk in Manhattan later the same day was a surreal experience, particularly when it came to having to change this habit that had by then become second nature.

is today, she said. “You got up and were in the fields at five and you worked until two, when you came home and had lunch. Nobody used to work for anyone else. You were your own boss.”

Esteban, who in his late 40s still works full-time as a coffee farmer and agriculturalist, most lamented this loss of independence – not for himself, but for his fellow Orosians. He was one of the first people to whom I spoke about coffee, and he spoke in glowing terms about how much he loved working in and with coffee, how much he loved being independent and setting his own hours. He was the one who decided what needed to be done, and when, and if one day he went up late to the fields or drove up to Cartago to buy supplies, that was his choice. He led me around his closer fields – to get there, one simply had to walk straight up the mountain behind his house. Despite having finished a triathlon at altitude only a few weeks earlier, I was out of breath by the time we got to his field, less than a quarter of the way up the hill. Esteban looked like he had been out for a gentle stroll, and he was carrying some equipment to use later. He could drive, he told me, but why use a machine when God had given him legs and the strength to take him up the hill? He only drove the pickup when he had a lot to carry up or down; it saved on wear and tear and kept him in good shape. Clearly, his methods were effective.

Esteban was also the first one who introduced me to the sense of land-as-history that I have since discovered is pervasive among Costa Rican coffee farmers. He could tell me the history of each bush: this one is finicky, that one always gives a good yield, this one was planted the year my younger daughter was born. Esteban pointed out the boundaries between his land and that of his neighbors, borders that were invisible to me but completely obvious to him.<sup>44</sup> This was not a quirk of Esteban’s, a man who was one of few Orosians to still earn the majority of his living from coffee. Jorge, who opened this chapter, could still recite the history of lands that belonged to friends and family, including

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<sup>44</sup> As I improved in my knowledge of coffee maintenance, I began to see differences between the fields that corresponded to individual ideas about the spacing of the bushes, application of fertilizer and pesticide, at what point bushes should be pruned, and whether organic matter should be left on the ground as compost or cleared away. At the time, however, this was all beyond me, and even when I walked up past his fields in the summer of 2013 I still could not tell where one field began and another ended. Beyond my lack of historical knowledge, Esteban and his neighbors were more closely aligned in their practices than most.

transactions that had occurred long before his birth in the 1960s. Other farmers pointed to shifting property lines or the brown of landslides as a way to explain change. And everyone in rural Costa Rica, *campesino* or otherwise, gives directions using long-dead trees or plowed-over fields as reference points. It is a way of referring to people and spaces that is illegible to the outsider, a way of seeing visible only to those who belong. In Costa Rica,<sup>45</sup> outside of San José and some of the larger cities there are no addresses; one way to state my address, for example, was “300 meters south of the church, right-hand side, black fence.” The church, at least, is a fixed reference point readily discernible even by outsiders, but I was routinely given directions stating distances from “the old fig tree” (which was taken down 10 years ago) or “the house of Mariela who makes tortillas.” This form of place-making is entirely comprehensible to the insider, but results in a lot of getting lost for the outsider. Outsider does not have to mean foreigner: anyone not from town would need further clarification before reckoning their location with respect to Mariela’s house.

As for the Apache, where place-names worked to “store” memory (Basso 1996), the landscape itself is a repository of memory and connection to the past, to the hundreds of years of learning, tradition, and knowledge about coffee that has been passed down through the generations. In this case, what was invisible to me was obvious to Esteban and Jorge and the other men (and women) like them. What they feared, however, was that their children would become or were already like me, unable to understand how much work and family lore went into coffee, how much the land’s features mattered. It was perhaps this fear that their children would not see the land as they did that drove so many people to focus so much on values derived from the hard work of coffee production, even as their children looked to technology to provide answers instead. It was a lack of such knowledge that separated the younger generation, blamed for the town’s problems, from those who could speak authoritatively about *antes*, the time before.

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<sup>45</sup> This is not unique to Costa Rica; much of Central America lacks a standardized means of recording and denoting addresses.

Although not often expressed in terms of fear, these two themes – of being one’s own boss, and of knowing the land intimately – carried through the majority of my conversations with people in their late 20s and older. Jorge, for example, was attracted to taxi driving in part because he was able to continue being his own boss – he could choose not to work on a given day, or choose to take a longer trip over shorter ones, or vice versa. If he chose not to work and came up a little short on cash that month, it was his own fault, he said, but it was much more satisfying knowing that it was his choice to make.

This independence led to a relatively wide variety of farming practices across the Valley. As we will see in the following chapters, one of the ironic results of the shift towards specialty coffee, ostensibly focused on small farmers and their specialized knowledge, has been to attempt to standardize practices that were previously left up to farmers to manage on their own. Orosi farmers disagreed with each other, sometimes vociferously, about most of the variables that affect yield and quality, to the great frustration of the buyers who wanted a more consistent product. Whenever I mentioned one opinion to another farmer – without associating that opinion with a name or a buyer – it would inevitably incite a long discussion about proper farming practice, and the hows and whys of those decisions. There was, so far as I could tell, no agreement about any of the details, and the ability to make those decisions for oneself was seen as critical to the farming endeavor. Coffee farming with someone telling you what to do all the time would take all of the fun and art and science and satisfaction out of it. It would just be another job, instead of a way of life.

Even Jorge, who had some of the strongest opinions of anyone about what should be done to grow the best coffee, agreed that there was room for variation. The slope of a hill, its orientation towards the sun and the wind, whether the hills above it attracted clouds or not – these were all factors that affected how much permanent shade cover was needed, how closely the bushes should be planted,

and what, if anything, they should be intercropped with to produce the best overall yields.<sup>46</sup> Farmers whose fields were alongside each other could experience different conditions and even different amounts of rainfall. How could a boss or manager living away in Cartago or the United States know about this variation and take it into account? Besides, Jorge said, if everyone did everything the same way all the time not only would they not have anything to talk about, but they would have nothing to learn. He might think that a particular method was crazy, and sometimes it was, but sometimes it produced results, and if it did a smart farmer would pay attention to what his neighbor was doing, and the next season he would try out the same thing to see if it worked on his farm, too. For him, homogeneity would stifle innovation and improvement, an assessment not always shared by contemporary buyers (see the last three chapters).

### **Qué Duro, Pero Qué Rico**

In Orosi, the coffee harvest begins in late November and peaks just before Christmas, with the highest elevations lingering through the end of January. Historically, the farms were small enough that they could be managed by a farmer and perhaps the occasional assistance of his sons, while his daughters stayed home and took care of domestic work. During the harvest, however, was when familial obligation was greatest. Because coffee ripens unevenly, and because the highest prices are paid for selective picking, that is, picking only the ripe cherries and leaving the rest to continue to mature, it is necessary to go through a given field three or four times. Today, with climate change, truly selective harvesting can take five or even six passes, but most people agreed that back then three was more common.

“It was your responsibility, your *deber*, to help out with the harvest,” said Martina. In her late twenties, she was expecting her first child, and we had been friends for several years before she told me

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<sup>46</sup> As evidenced by the bounty available in the vegetable stands in town, bananas, citrus fruits, avocado, and firewood-bearing trees are all used to provide shade, nutrition replacement in the soil, and as an additional source of income for farmers.

this story. She was one of the many people around her age who initially told me that they “didn’t know anything about coffee,” expecting perhaps that I wanted technical or biological details on the plant and how to grow it. I got this answer quite frequently, particularly with younger adults. They knew less than their fathers and uncles, so it seemed like nothing in comparison to this wealth of knowledge.

Martina and I had begun by talking about her pregnancy and her expectations and aspirations for her child, and now she was telling me more about the coffee harvests of her childhood and teenage years. “You’d get up really early to go to the fields, maybe four or five. And sometimes it would be really hot and there would be bugs and serpents and sometimes it would be really cold and rainy and you’d be miserable. But it didn’t matter, you had to pick anyway, no matter what the weather. Everyone did it. It was a way to help the family. And then at lunchtime you’d sit down, it didn’t matter that you were all dirty, that your hands were all dirty, and you’d eat tortillas and whatever you’d brought, cold, and it would be the most delicious meal you’d ever eaten. Something about being up in the fields just made everything taste delicious. And then finally at two or three you’d come back down and wash up. Everyone did this, it was expected. One day you’d go to your father’s farm, and the next day to your uncle’s, and then your cousin’s, and so on. Everyone would be up there, and your grandmother would watch the little kids. And that was how you got things for Christmas or for the house, picking coffee, because you’d get a little “gift” for your work. *Qué rico, pero qué duro*. How wonderful, but how hard [it was].”

Rodrigo, who was the same age as Martina, had a similar set of memories. “That was how I got a Transformer [toy] one year,” he said, grinning at the recollection. “That was the only thing I wanted, and I picked coffee to get it.” Juan, just a few years older than Rodrigo and Martina, told me that “*café es un regalo de Dios para la navidad*” – coffee is God’s gift for Christmas. He explained that this worked in two ways. One, everyone earned a little something for their efforts: a toy for children, a portion of the proceeds for adults. Two, it brought the family together in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Schools



were (and are) closed for vacation from the end of November until February, coinciding with the harvest and allowing children to help without having to worry about it interfering with their studies. The result was that the entire month of December, even though it was filled with the hard work of harvesting, felt like a giant family celebration, culminating with Christmas and a joyous religious event.

Coffee not only cemented obligations between kin, it allowed for relatively expensive Christmas gifts and celebrations. Rodrigo told me that the reason Ticos were so bad at saving money was because some always came in just before the holiday.<sup>47</sup> You didn't have to put any aside throughout the year, he said, because you'd get paid for your coffee just when it was time to buy food or gifts or decorations. Nowadays, coffee money had been replaced by the *aguinaldo*,<sup>48</sup> but in the 1980s, when Orosians were already used to coffee providing money for "extras" rather than needing every penny for household expenses, you picked not only because it was your family responsibility, but because you'd get a little gift for your efforts.

"But today," Martina said, "kids don't want to do it [pick coffee], they want to stay home and play video games." Rather than calling on kin to do the work of the harvest, work that was lightened by the presence of family, farmers have to hire people to pick who are willing to work for very little. "It was very little that you earned back then [in the 1980s and early 1990s] and it's very little now, two or three thousand colones [four or six dollars] for a whole day's worth of really hard work. Kids nowadays don't want to do that, so they have to hire Nicaraguans."

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<sup>47</sup> No one I knew had a savings account, although they all had checking accounts. On Fridays, when most people were paid, there was always a line at the ATM, as few people had any cash left by then – credit cards, though fairly widely accepted, are still not a common form of payment for small purchases.

<sup>48</sup> The *aguinaldo*, or "thirteenth month," payment is given to all employees in Costa Rica between December 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. The employer must average the amount the worker has earned each month for the past year, and then give them a bonus payment equal to that average. It is one of the reasons that Costa Ricans tend to reckon their salaries according to their monthly earnings, rather than yearly as is common in the United States, and it reinforced the need to not save money for Christmas. The *aguinaldo* is technically supposed to be paid to anyone who works in Costa Rica, including agricultural and temporary workers, but in practice it seems that few of the migrant coffee pickers receive this payment.

## ***No Ground to Go To***

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Memory and commemoration are everywhere in Orosi, but they are present only for those who know how to see and read the signs: geographic perturbations; the remains of the deadly 2002 landslide; the nostalgia evoked by a yo-yo; the remains of “Orosi Colonial” modifications under the satellite dish. These function as *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, a shorthand from which the longer recollection can later be accessed (Basso 1996; Connerton 1989; Nora 1989; Young 1993). Though they are often treated as such, memories “are not intact vertebra of fossil animals which would in themselves permit reconstruction of the entities of which they were once a part” (Halbwachs 1992:47). It would have been useful if memory could have been imported wholesale into the present in order to reconstruct a more stable, family-oriented era, so that the children and grandchildren of elders could better face a present that was increasingly complex, non-Costa Rican, and filled with uncertainty, but this was not possible.

The past had its problems, but most laughed off their poverty as part of the price of sharing and belonging so concretely to a place and people. The external dangers of the past – indigeneity – were made invisible, as were Nicaraguans, who represented a contemporary danger. This nostalgia, utopian, postcard view of the past did have its points of perturbation, however, and one of them was that of gender roles, an internal danger that had to be made invisible in different ways. Gendered violence was mentioned by Xinia, Carmen, Felicia, and a dozen other women, but only very briefly and in passing, and never in a context where I felt comfortable asking follow-up questions. This violence took different forms: for Xinia, it came as a drunken father who would hit you if he didn’t think you were working hard enough or if the meal wasn’t ready when he came home. Carmen’s father didn’t think that women should study or work outside the home, though now, she said, he dotes on his granddaughters who plan on studying at university. Woman after woman mentioned husbands who beat them, fathers who drunkenly asserted their authority, going without enough to eat so that the men working in the fields would have enough calories. It was so casually mentioned that I did not always realize what I was

hearing until the sentence was concluded and the speaker had moved on to another topic. “That was the way it was,” most of them said, “but thank God it’s different now. Now there are laws that protect women and children. You can’t just hit people. This is something we’ve learned as we’ve become more educated.” Their nostalgia was tempered by these memories of gendered violence, visited upon their own bodies and that of their mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and in some cases daughters. For these women, it was the one part of the past that was best left behind, a relic that had no use for teaching today’s generations about values and behavior and belonging. Unfortunately, this violence had not been left behind as definitively as these women wished. The Orosi police department had no official statistics, or even unofficial ones, but several officers told me that the biggest problem the town faced was not youth vagabonds or drug trafficking, the two that received the most narrative attention. No, the officers said, domestic violence was a bigger problem, but it was nearly impossible to combat through the means at their disposal.

Even where physical violence was not a problem, women today still face narrowly defined gender roles in the home. They did not connect gendered obligation to the violence of the past, perhaps because those stories were not shared in the same way. While the narratives of belonging, hard work, and mutual obligation circulated as lessons that should be heeded in the present day, gendered violence was tossed aside as truly past. Thus while youth “vagabonds” or drug traffickers were blamed for their failure to listen to these lessons, to pay attention to history, women were not expected to see past violence as in any way relevant to the expectation that they cook, clean, care for children, and run the entire household while also holding down a job outside the home. Yet women, particularly those in their twenties and thirties, complained to me about the laziness of their husbands, brothers, and fathers, and often asked if women in the United States were expected to clean as much as they were. This divide was not lost on men, either. Mario, in his late thirties, and I were talking one day about marriage and expectations. I told him that I expected any husband of mine to share in the household duties equally;

that marriage, in my opinion, should be a partnership. “You’ll never get married then,” he laughed. “At least not to a Tico.”

My marital prospects notwithstanding, certainly gender roles and gendered violence deserve more attention than I have given them here. But what I want to highlight with these brief discussions is that rather than offering a place from which to view and understand and make sense of the future, what this nostalgic, postcard version of the past has done is instead to reinforce a status quo so narrowly described that is not capable of withstanding the challenges of the twenty-first century. That is, by retaining only the best parts of the past as wells from which to draw lessons on behavior, morality, and obligation, Orosians have made it difficult to grapple with questions that were not thinkable thirty years ago, prior to the arrival of Nicaraguan workers and more recently, of CAFTA. It is difficult to make sense of an increasingly diverse population when one’s mythos and identity is predicated on homogeneity of skin color, religious belief, and origin, when the stories that are told reinforce that homogeneity as the source of all good things, as the basis for the formation of a welfare state in a region beset by dictatorship and violence. It relegates women’s contemporary experiences of domestic violence and of gendered inequality to the same elision with which Nicaraguans and indigeneity are treated.

The silence, and the tight drawing of a circle of belonging around certain kinds of bodies and pasts, are not complete, of course. Pieces that do not fit the narrative, that are too complex for the postcard, slip through, as individuals struggle to make sense of their own individual and collective pasts. This is a process of historicization, “accept[ing] that the past is constructed, that things are not given but made and made sense of” (Dirks 1996:32). The claim to a humble *campesino* farmer identity calls upon a particular notion of Costa Rican history and invokes a nostalgia for a past that belonged only to Costa Ricans, rather than a present that must be shared with Nicaraguan “others” in a context where agriculture no longer offers a relatively predictable source of emotional and physical sustenance, where it once tied families together and literally grounded them in a given space. If the past is the glue that

binds people together in shared social relations (Connerton 1989; McGranahan 2010), and if coffee was the focal point around which the past rotated, what happens now that coffee is being picked by Nicaraguans – Nicaraguans who are not supposed to even exist in Orosi?

I will attempt to answer this question in later chapters, but I want to end this section with a conversation I had with Dr. Iván Molina Jiménez. Molina Jiménez is a history professor at the University of Costa Rica (UCR) who has written widely on Costa Rican exceptionalism, and we met several times in his tiny office on the UCR campus. Costa Rica, he said, had suffered greatly in moving from a small-scale society to one that is larger and more anonymous. “In the seventies it was easy to solve problems – there were only two million people. Today, with more than four million, it’s very different. The culture hasn’t adapted.” Ticos had a problem of increasing individualization and “irresponsibilization,” the process of being or becoming irresponsible. It was a maladaptive response to increasing tourism, capitalism, and anonymity. “Before there were greater levels of civic participation, there were an extraordinary number of cooperatives, practically everyone belonged to a group. Now there is little participation in collective life, few people vote in the elections, they only participate when there is a clear, rapid benefit, or one that is guaranteed. Otherwise, they lose interest. They focus on the family instead of the community.”

I have argued that kinship and obligation created certain kinds of family ties that were renewed each year during the harvest, and which are also visible in other arenas, such as in the continued existence of the vegetable stand. As Molina Jiménez noted for the country as a whole, in Orosi this obligation created a milieu in which family was the central point of identification, followed by a tightly drawn notion of what constituted the town. The state was visible primarily through employment with ICE, the electric company, and less obviously through its control over the coffee industry and its regulation of prices and working conditions. The town’s past was remembered through a rosy nostalgia for a time when the state provided employment, education, and infrastructure, when everyone knew

each other, and there was little economic differentiation between individuals and families. This postcard version of the past, which ignores or downplays the town's indigenous heritage, the importance of Nicaraguans for continued coffee production, and issues such as gendered violence, is held up as the model for proper behavior, particularly for "vagabond" youths who have never engaged in the hard work of coffee production. Coffee produced a set of values at the same time that it offered economic stability and an "extra" on top of generous state salaries that allowed the town to move rapidly from an impoverished rural hamlet to one that is middle-class, with an educated younger generation that sees coffee as the work of Nicaraguans or their poorer neighbors rather than the cherished anchor for personal and national identity. Into this set of silences, carefully narrated histories, and belonging to a family, rather than a community, unwittingly stepped specialty coffee and a wholly different set of expectations from coffee buyers. I end this chapter with Orosi on the edge of this moment of danger, just prior to the specialty and tourism booms and the implementation of CAFTA, all of which will be discussed in the final two chapters.

## **Chapter Three: Commodity and Value in the Specialty Coffee Industry**

In 2010 I attended the World Coffee Conference, held once every five years. That year it was in Guatemala City, a place I usually move through as quickly as possible on my way from the airport to the coffee-growing highlands. Though I was familiar with both the airport and the city, I had never before packed a black dress and heels in my backpack; my usual gear was quick-dry T-shirts and comfortable sneakers. But as a conference attendee I was invited to a black-tie party, hosted by the President of Guatemala and attended by the presidents of Honduras and El Salvador, and Chaco sandals and REI pants weren't going to cut it. The party was held at the anthropology museum on the outskirts of Guatemala City; participants were bussed there from the three-star hotel downtown that hosted most of the events. Outside the museum, holding candles to light our way, were living statues – men and women dressed in traditional Maya clothing performing ostensibly traditional indigenous tasks, such as lighting fires and grinding corn. Phenotypically, not one of them was Maya, a detail that no one else seemed to notice. Inside, the President's speech welcomed everyone to Guatemala, waxed poetic about the country's great indigenous heritage, ignoring the role his party had played in an attempted genocide against indigenous communities in the 1980s, and invited us to try coffee straight from the mainly indigenous highlands.

Feeling more than a little uncomfortable, I spent the evening talking with two farmers who were attending the conference at the discount rate of \$10 per person (I had paid \$650). They were lucky: they not only had the money to pay for registration and transportation to Guatemala City, but they had relatives to stay with nearby and workers who could watch their farms for the duration of the weekend. The farmers spent the evening giving me the sugarless versions of the endless speeches being made by the President and by a number of coffee industry CEOs and directors and wondering whether all the

money that ANACAFE, the Guatemalan National Coffee Association, was spending on the conference would ever be returned to them in the form of higher coffee prices and better relations with buyers.

This conference, and others like it, provides a space for specialty coffee industry leaders to convene, discuss pressing issues (ranging from quality to marketing to urbanization of farming communities), and to find new buyers, sellers, suppliers or customers. The specialty coffee industry is made up of millions of people dispersed around the world, many of whom have no access to the sort of information or networking present at the World Coffee Conference. Though in the years since 2010 networking and conversation about specialty coffee's challenges and opportunities has become more widely available to a wider range of people, thanks to the proliferation of blogs, news sites, and Facebook and Twitter accounts dedicated to coffee, those who truly set the tone for industry goals were most likely all physically present in Guatemala, though the bulk of their work as narrators and trendsetters takes place in the Global North. In this chapter, I move from Costa Rica towards spaces such as the World Coffee Conference (physically located in the global South, but with actors and ideas from the North) and the west coast of the United States, where specialty coffee was born.

Journalist Michaela Weissman's *God in a Cup: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Coffee* profiles three high-end specialty coffee buyers/roasters/retailers; while I cannot be certain, they were likely in attendance both at the conference itself and at the black-tie party at the museum. If I may put words in their mouth for a moment, they would probably have told me that night that relationships between buyers and farmers are the key to not only lifting farmers out of poverty, but also in producing the best cup of coffee possible for consumers. They would also have been likely to tell me that as opposed to buyers for Folgers or Nescafé, they looked for the most exquisite, remarkable coffee they could find; their coffee, they might have said, was not commodity coffee. It was no longer a commodity at all.

This conversation might be imagined, but it is certainly a reasonable leap that I take in doing so. The inside cover of Weissman's book's dust jacket poses three questions: "Can a cup of coffee reveal the



face of God? Can it become the holy grail of modern-day knights-errant who brave hardship and peril in a relentless quest for perfection? Can it save the world?" (Weissman 2008). It then adds: "These questions are not rhetorical" and that the coffee traveler must be, among other things, "part Indiana Jones." Throughout the book Weissman follows the buyers, who own some of the biggest independent specialty coffee operations in the United States, as they travel around the world in search of the best coffee. It turns out that God can indeed be found in a cup of Panamanian Geisha (also spelled Gesha) coffee, which can retail for as much as \$200 a pound.<sup>49</sup> The story of this coffee, she writes in the introduction, is one of

an ugly duckling coffee that grew into a gorgeous swan. It's about scarcity, and the lust that scarcity engenders in those driven to possess what others can never have. It's about the greed that inevitably emerges when the possibility of making a great deal of money selling something rare and precious presents itself, and it is about a new generation of hip young coffee buyers who are madly, wildly, deeply in love with coffee in a way their elders in the coffee business find ever-so-slightly preposterous. [Weissman 2008:xv]

As to whether it can save the world, Weissman's answer is noncommittal: perhaps it can, but the retail price will need to rise, and the "hip young buyers" may need to temper some of their unbridled enthusiasm for a single coffee in order to better spread the wealth to more farmers.

These two very different perspectives of the poor-but-not-desperate farmer and the globe-trotting coffee buyer offer but a hint into the world of specialty coffee. It is a world in which one coffee blog, Sprudge, describes seemingly every new coffeeshop, piece of machinery, or coffee varietal as "gorgeous" and where coffee cuppers discuss the flavor notes that separate a Costa Rican Tarrazú from a Costa Rican Tres Ríos. It is also a world where Mark Pendergrast, author of the definitive volume on the history of coffee, can dismiss the inequities experienced by coffee farmers as relatively benign compared to that of workers in other industries, since "the vast majority is grown on tiny plots by peasants who love their trees and the ripe cherries they produce" (Pendergrast 1999:410). This love,

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<sup>49</sup> I had a \$9 cup of it myself in Boquete, Panama; the coffee was quite good, but failed to convince me that it was three or four times as good as the other options offered by the shop. Put another way, it also failed to convince me that the other coffees were three or four times worse.

and the beauty which frequently surrounds coffee fields, is apparently enough to dismiss as unnecessary any attempts to improve working conditions or the price paid for green coffee. At the same time, hundreds of groups, certifications, labels, and solidarity movements have been formed in the past thirty years to advocate for just that. They see their missions to offer quality coffee and quality of life as inextricably linked, and it is in these encounters that specialty coffee's odd duality is visible. Specialty industry purveyors make clear and repeated distinctions between their coffee and what they disparagingly refer to as commodity coffee, the everyday stuff that comes in giant tins with familiar labels. In contrast, in spaces like the World Coffee Conference leaders discuss coffee as a unique, artisanal good even as it circulates to the tune of some \$15-20 billion per year in the United States alone (SCAA 2012). Though their notion of "commodity" is at odds with Marx's definition (see below), nonetheless the concept is a powerful one which animates much of the anxiety over, discussion about, and marketing of specialty coffee.

In this chapter, I present a history of specialty coffee as an antidote to the mass-produced commodity coffee that was generally the only option for consumers until the 1970s. In order to convince consumers that specialty was better than conventional coffee, and thus worth the higher price, purveyors called attention to a number of characteristics, among them the coffee's physical makeup; the traceability of a given lot back to an individual farmer; and the ability of the purveyor to tell a story that connects the two. The notion of coffee as a story is a powerful one that permeates, and I argue animates, the specialty industry, giving meaning to the work done by people who occupy very different class positions along the commodity chain. That coffee is a story, or that producing coffee is an act of love, helps ameliorate some of the anxiety that purveyors feel about the poverty many farmers face, but as we will see in the following chapters, it also serves as a basis for rejecting coffee that fails to meet narrative standards.

Specialty purveyors argue that their coffee is not a commodity, but is a unique good that is essentially gifted from farmer to retailer to consumer, the result of a labor of love and attention (Mauss 2000[1925]). Just like the narratives of the past that circulate in Orosi, this kind of storytelling requires the elision of elements that do not fit this narrative, whether they are of farmers who do not properly perform care (chapter six), or of the financial complexities of risk and risk management (chapter five). The result, however, is not a decommodified good, but rather a commodity in which object life histories or narratives are employed in different ways to increase surplus value for purveyors if not for farmers.

This is not to say that specialty coffee is devoid of any connection to the Maussian notion of the gift. Specialty, like a gift, offers connections between an imagined past and the present, and both are given in the service of larger notions of obligation, reciprocity, and personal connection. Both have life histories or biographies: stories can be told about them and about their owners or caretakers. The idea that specialty is a gift, even though it is bought and sold, is a powerful animating force since it is the antithesis of the anonymity and lack of care that is seen as characterizing Fordist commodities. After all, commodities are bought and sold on an impersonal and amoral market, are often produced via an assembly line, and appear to the consumer as a fully finished object, devoid of the social relations which caused them to be produced. Despite the protestations of World Coffee Conference participants, I argue that not only is specialty coffee still a commodity, it is a hyper-fetishized one. It is a repository for a particular kind of collective life history, a narrative that traces the coffee's origins on a remote farm somewhere Other, to its transformation from a cherry to a bean, and finally to its resting place in one's cup, where it is meant to be enjoyed with the full awareness of all the work that went into its production.

### ***The Need for Specialty Coffee***

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In the final analysis specialty coffee will be defined by the quality of the product, whether green bean, roasted bean or prepared beverage and by the quality of life that coffee can deliver to all of those involved in its cultivation, preparation and degustation. [Rhinehart 2009:1-2]

Ric Rhinehart, the executive director of the SCAA, the Specialty Coffee Association of America, writes that industry specialists see their role as “unlocking” the quality inherent in the bean. Not every coffee bean has the same potential: specialty coffee can only be “drawn from the appropriate intersection of cultivar, microclimate, soil chemistry and husbandry. Plant a great variety of coffee at the wrong altitude or in the wrong soil and no specialty product can be produced or get the right combination of cultivar and chemistry, but the wrong climate and the potential for quality is destroyed” (Rhinehart 2011:1). One mill manager in Orosi put it to me more bluntly: “Once it leaves the farm, everyone else along the line can only make it worse.” Essentially, whatever the coffee is like when it leaves the farm is the best it can be. Considering how many hands the beans must pass through before they reach the consumer – from farmer, to miller, to exporter, to roaster, to barista or your home coffeemaker – it is no wonder that the industry is so focused on improving quality at the source. Rather than *creating* quality, it is the job of the actors in the chain to prevent low-quality beans from reaching the consumer, to remove them from the mix during the growing, roasting, and presentation stages.

Yet not all coffee receives this kind of attention, and certainly, for most of coffee’s history as a world beverage quality as it is understood today was far from its most important characteristic – caffeine was. As mentioned earlier, coffee consists of two predominant species: *Coffea arabica* (Arabica) and *Coffea canephora* (robusta). Nearly all specialty coffee is Arabica, and it is grown in specific microclimates, notably at altitude and preferably in volcanic soil (McCook 2006; 2008; Mintz 2009; Wirth 2006). Robusta was introduced to the world in the late 1800s by the Dutch via central Africa as a solution to the leaf rust fungus *hemileia vastatrix* (*roya* in Spanish) that was killing off many of the original Arabica plants.<sup>50</sup> Hardier, and more suited to growth in the tropical lowlands that had been plagued by rust, robusta was mainly exported from Dutch colonies to the United States and never

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<sup>50</sup> Rust is again a problem for Arabica growers, particularly in Central America, where some areas have lost 75% of their crop in the past few years.

gained much traction in the Americas outside of Brazil (McCook 2008:4-10). Despite early reticence by coffee retailers, by 1925 robusta was sold on the New York Stock Exchange and was mainly used for blending with the Arabica coffees with which the public was familiar (McCook 2008:4). The use of robusta was seen as “the lowering of a proud standard, the crumbling of a tradition” (1999:261); it was also, however, much cheaper than relying solely on Arabica, due to the fact that much of its harvest can be mechanized and that the yield per bush is much higher than that of Arabica.

Prohibition increased coffee’s popularity in the United States, while the return of soldiers after World War Two solidified it as an ordinary, everyday drink; the Army had included instant coffee as part of soldiers’ rations, and they continued to demand it after their return. The real consumption explosion came in the late 1950s and 1960s with the introduction of new packaging and preparation technologies that made coffee last longer and taste fresher (Pendergrast 1999:125). In particular, instant coffee, also known as soluble or synthetic, was hailed in magazines and television advertisements as the epitome of sexiness and modernity. In 1962 it was proposed that synthetic coffee, like synthetic fabric, was the wave of the future, and by 1981 instant coffee made up 28% of the coffee market in the United States – a greater share than that enjoyed by specialty today (McCook 2008:6-9). The advertisements, whether in print, radio, or later, on television of the period indicated that husbands would be perfectly reasonable to beat their wives for offering them below-standard coffee, though by the standards of Weissman’s buyers the 1950s and 1960s had nothing that remotely resembled quality coffee. It was a Bourdieu-ian shift in how taste was and is continually in motion (see chapter four) (Bourdieu 1984).

The rise of cheaper-to-process instant coffee was due to the wildly erratic price of coffee during these decades, a phenomenon compounded by the arrival of coffee alternatives such as Pepsi and Coke. As a result, much of the twentieth century was marked by price wars between the leading coffee roasters, which merged, spun off, and re-merged with each other throughout the latter half of the century. As civil wars, frosts, floods, and earthquakes affected both the price and availability of different

beans, the major roasters – Folgers, Maxwell House, and to a lesser degree Chock Full O’ Nuts – experimented with their blends, looking for the cheapest mix that the customer would tolerate at the highest price they would pay. The result was a race to the bottom in terms of quality: in the decades following World War II, these brands would sell coffee for the same price in smaller and smaller tins, promising that the blend would offer the same number of cups due to its “freshness” or “flavor crystals” or “richness” or some other marketing term aimed at tricking customers into believing they weren’t actually drinking a watered-down cup (Pendergrast 1999). Pendergrast does not blame this entirely on roasters and marketers: the national taste in the United States, he says, was for “pallid, grounds-speckled, boiled slops” (Pendergrast 1999:236), so that, according to him, customers basically got what they asked for. The 1970s would show, however, that customer taste preference was not some sort of genetic or deeply culturally conditioned trait, but that it was born of marketing and availability.

In 1953, as Coke and Pepsi began winning over the youth market, a massive frost in Brazil killed much of its coffee and drove up prices so rapidly that Congress initiated an investigation into price gouging. It was not price gouging, but supply and demand on the most basic level: Brazil produced most of the world’s coffee, so when its supply was affected, buyers would have to pay more for what was left to ensure they could meet their needs. It seems likely that some sellers did hoard to a degree to maintain a high price, but the Congressional investigation found little to report. As prices rose, farmers around the world planted more coffee in response: four years later, as those plants matured, prices dropped due to an increase in supply. This boom-and-bust coffee cycle only worsened during the Cold War, as more African and Asian countries entered the market. Coffee production had always been cyclical, but the long time to maturity combined with Cold War politics and protectionist economics to drive the cycles to greater extremes (Pendergrast 1999; Talbot 2004). Multiply this effect by the forty or so countries producing coffee, and it becomes easy to see why the major roasters preferred to dilute their product rather than raise and lower prices in response. In fact, the roasters took this dilution to the

limits of food technology: to hide the ever-worsening and weakening taste, particularly of instant coffee, they added an artificial smell to the jar. When it was opened, the aroma of fresh coffee would burst out of the can, fooling customers into thinking they were about to drink something delicious, when really it was what the Consumers Research Bulletin of 1950 called a drink that was “hot and wet and looks like coffee, but any resemblance to coffee is purely coincidental” (Pendergrast 1999:240).

### ***Specialty Coffee to the Rescue?***

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In contrast to the “boiled slops” of the 1950s to 1970s, specialty coffee today has become a “dessert food,” directed at “urban, urbane, professional men and women who distinguished themselves through consumption and who consumed or hoped to consume variety and quality, as well as quantity” (Roseberry 1996:773). One of the pioneers of this movement was Alfred Peet, a Dutch immigrant who opened Peet’s Coffee and Tea in Berkeley in 1966. Darker and twice as strong as conventional coffees of the time, he had to teach his customers that “it takes a long time to understand the language the bean uses to talk to you” (Pendergrast 1999:292). This rhetoric of consumer education and “listening” to coffee would prove to be a key component of specialty coffee, as would Peet’s emphasis on quality and proper preparation.

In 1971 Peet began selling beans to a small company in Seattle named Starbucks, which by 1972 had grown popular enough that he told the three owners they needed to roast their own coffee, as he could no longer meet their demand. Also in 1972 the Mr. Coffee automatic drip brewer, promoted by Joe DiMaggio, was released onto the market; though it had its faults, it was a major improvement on the existing percolators or home-brew methods that tended to boil out coffee’s flavors (Pendergrast 1999:292-313). On the coasts, at least, it was possible now to purchase higher-quality beans and to brew them properly at home. For the rest of the country, however, the big roasters were the only option, and with civil wars in Central America, Uganda, and Angola, coffee prices continued to rise, and conventional coffee quality continued to drop.

In 1974, there were enough people buying and selling quality coffee that the term “specialty” was coined to differentiate it from conventional coffee. The Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) was established in 1982; its goal was to lobby for itself as an industry, particularly when it came to explaining why consumers should pay more money for what seemed to many to be the same product as Folgers or Maxwell House (Rhinehart 2011). While even today the SCAA has no single definition for what makes coffee “special,” in general, coffee is considered “specialty” category first by virtue of its biological composition and secondly by its geographic origin (McCook 2008; Mintz 2009; Roseberry 1996). There is an apparently objective component to this definition: specialty grade coffee is any that receives a grade of 80 or above during cupping (tasting; see below), while conventional, also known as “commodity,” coffee is graded as 79 or below. Specialty coffee goes beyond biology, taste, and environment, however: the fundamental premise is that “specialty coffee beans [will] always be well prepared, freshly roasted, and properly brewed” (Rhinehart 2011:1) – that is, the antithesis of preground Maxwell House.

Specialty’s rise and growth in the 1980s signaled “a distinct break with a past characterized by mass production and consumption” (Roseberry 1996:763). For some roasters, it was also tied directly to the inequity experienced by coffee farmers: in 1985, in the midst of the Contra war in Nicaragua and just a few months before the Iran-Contra affair became public knowledge, Paul Katzeff invited a Sandinista to the SCAA meeting (Pendergrast 1999:354).<sup>51</sup> A few years later, in protest of U.S. involvement in the Salvadoran civil war, he led a march through the convention banging drums and dumping water dyed blood-red onto the hotel steps (Pendergrast 1999:356; Weissman 2008). Not all SCAA members were pleased by this – and there’s no word on who had to pay to clean up the presumable stain – but Katzeff

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<sup>51</sup> The Sandinistas had successfully overthrown the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 and had proceeded to collectivize and nationalize many privately-held industries in order to improve the woeful living conditions of the majority. Cold War fears led the United States to intervene by sending *contrarevolucionarios*, counterrevolutionaries, to break the revolution and restore capitalism. They ruled, in name if not always in practice, until 1990, when a democratic election ousted them from power (Lancaster 1992).



was far from alone: that same year, in the name of solidarity with impoverished Salvadorans, dockworkers in San Francisco, Vancouver, Seattle, and Long Beach refused to off-load containers of Salvadoran coffee, arguing that to do so would be to support the military. The action forced the ship to return to El Salvador, eliminating one source of income for the military and the ruling elite (Pendergrast 1999:356). In 1986 Equal Exchange began selling Nicaraguan coffee, trying to answer one question: “What if food could be traded in a way that is honest and fair, a way that empowers both farmers and consumers?” (Equal Exchange 2014). Two years later, at the same time as Katzeff’s march, Dutch coffee buyers created the Max Havelaar label, the first of what would become many Fair Trade certifications (see below) (Lyon 2010; Pendergrast 1999). The result of this activity is that today, specialty coffeeshops dominate the U.S. landscape, while Starbucks operates more than 19,000 stores in 60 countries. Specialty makes up about \$20 billion of the \$70-\$80 billion per year coffee market (Townsend 2012). As it has grown, it has segmented further, from the social justice-focus labels and certifications that grew out of the Max Havelaar movement, to environmental certifications such as Rainforest Alliance, to the boutique coffees that Weissberg describes in her book.

Considering how many hands the beans must pass through before they reach the consumer – from farmer, to miller, to exporter, to roaster, to barista or your home coffeemaker – it is no wonder that the industry is so focused on improving quality at the source. Rather than *creating* quality, it is the job of the actors in the commodity chain to prevent low-quality beans from reaching the consumer by removing them from the mix during the growing, roasting, and presentation stages. They are gatekeepers, and each year the gates get narrower.

### ***Commodities and the Commodity Fetish***

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As noted above, specialty industry actors refer to conventional coffees as “commodity” coffee. This type of coffee is seen as the closest that agriculture can come to factory production, where the place of origin, the labor of the workers, and even most of the qualities of the coffee itself are

homogenized and lost at various stages throughout the production process, much of which is mechanized in similar ways to large-scale corn or wheat operations in the United States. Specialty coffee, by contrast, is seen as artisanal, hand-crafted, hand-selected, and very much the result of intense labor interventions that have a direct result on the flavor outcomes, desired or otherwise. This is particularly true for boutique specialty coffee buyers, who see themselves as purchasing a product that has been, in their understanding of the term, completely decommodified – that is, it is totally unique in the world. Just as one Matisse or Picasso cannot be exchanged for another, neither can one high-end micro-lot replace another in a high-end shop. This definition of commodity differs from that used by theorists, particularly Marx and those influenced by him, but it is critical to understand both how the industry and political economists, following Marx, wield this term and more importantly, how it stands in for shifting ideas about quality and differentiation. I first undertake an explanation of commodities from a Marxist perspective before contrasting this understanding with that held by most members of the specialty coffee industry.

A commodity is any object that is exchanged, that has value, and whose value comes through that exchange (Appadurai 1986:3; Kopytoff 1986:64; Marx 1978[1972]). Commodities can take many forms, from widgets to cars to jeans to coffee; for Marx, the property held in common between commodities is that they exist as a result of human labor. While a thing's value truly comes from the labor required to produce it, this labor is hidden or forgotten when the thing is sold on the market, "so that it seems that its value somehow arises naturally from the qualities of the object itself" (Graeber 2001:26). Indeed, Marx saw this extraction of value from labor as unique to capitalism and the source of worker alienation: one's capacity to change the world (through labor or creative output) can be bought and sold in ways that are not possible or even thinkable in non-capitalist or pre-capitalist economies (Graeber 2001:55; Marx 1978[1972]; Taussig 1980). That is, the productive capabilities of people – even if never fully realized – are abstracted into labor-time, hourly, salaried, or piecemeal units that become

just as commoditized as the objects produced by that labor. The type of labor does not matter, just that it is a) partible and b) a source of value extraction by employers (Marx 1978[1972]:201).

In addition to being objects that circulate, commodities come to be fetishized; that is, to take on a life of their own and to act with agency, to stand in for personal relationships (Graeber 2001; Hudson and Hudson 2003; Marx 1978[1972]). The social determination of value and the labor that went into its creation is obfuscated, appearing “natural,” so that it is impossible to examine or understand the historical and social contexts and relations through which value determinations are made. It is possible only because laborers are divorced from the end results of their labor and consumers are divorced from the conditions of production: both are alienated from some physical attribute or aspect of the commodity itself (Marx 1972:23; Taussig 1980:8). That is, fetishizing an object entails a mediated and obfuscating relationship in which social inequality and human labor are hidden in a quasi-worship of the thing (Marx 1972:217), even as the things themselves become indistinguishable from one another. The object, in this case coffee, is seen as having some essential “coffee-ness” that is naturally present and inherent within the object itself, rather than resulting from a series of human-object and human-human interactions. In other words, as their labor is abstracted and obfuscated humans are treated as more thing-like at the same time that commodities become more animal- or human-like (Taussig 1980:8). The result is that “when a person wanders through the grocery store or shopping mall, what they see are the characteristics of the commodities themselves – the attractiveness of the packaging, the cut of the fabric, perhaps the lifestyle associations stapled on by marketing departments, and, of course, the price. In this sense the commodity has a life of its own, completely divorced from the process by which it was created” (Hudson and Hudson 2003:417).

The commodity’s history is invisible: it simply arrives on the store shelf, or one’s porch in an Amazon box, ready to meet the needs of the consumer, however small or grandiose. Each blender is indistinguishable from another with the same model number; its value is not in the work of the designer

or the machinist or the packager or the retailer, but in its ability to consistently smash items into the desired consistency. A blender that cannot meet this need is no longer useful, no matter how beautiful its design. Thus for the consumer, this crude materialism is perceived as the object's value, "embodied in its ability to satisfy her wants [as] an aspect of the product itself. All those intentions seem to be absorbed into the physical form of the object itself, this being all [the buyer] can see" (Graeber 2001:65). That is, all the effort that went into the blender's design, build, and sale is divorced from the work of the individuals involved and perceived as some inherent feature of "blender-ness." The social relationship here is not to or with people, but to and with objects. The blender stands in for the (likely hundreds) of people involved in its creation, but the consumer is unable to see their labor except as it is manifested in the blender's functionality.

### **Use, Exchange, and Surplus Value**

The claim to have de-commoditized coffee is predicated on the idea that high-end specialty coffee is unique in all the world, that a Panamanian La Esmeralda Geisha is in no way commensurate with a Geisha from anywhere else, even from another farm in Panama. It involves telling the story of that Geisha's origins, of the hard work done by the farmer(s) who grew it, the mill that kept it separate from inferior coffees, the roaster that understood how dark or light to roast, and the barista that prepared it. Yet all of this hard work can only be understood by one who has been suitably primed to understand it: its difference would likely be lost on one who only ever drank instant coffee with milk and sugar.

Thus in order to understand this claim that high-end or boutique coffee is de-commoditized, it is critical to understand how objects come to have value, how that value is determined, and whether they can ever become valuable enough, or imbued with enough power, to act on their own. In this section, I look first at Marx's concepts of use, surplus, and exchange value. Use-value is, at its most basic, an object's utility, "but this utility is not a thing of air...[it] becomes a reality only by use or consumption"

(Marx 1978[1972]:303). The labor involved is irrelevant: whether it is a gilded throne or a plastic folding chair, both objects have the same utility or use value, that of allowing you to sit down. Objects may have multiple use-values: coffee may slake thirst and deliver caffeine at the same time, but it will do both of those things regardless of how much you paid for it or how hard the participants along the commodity chain worked to bring it to you. For Marx, commodities are the “material depositories of exchange value” (Marx 1978[1972]:304), which at first appears to be nothing more than a ratio of exchange between two objects which fluctuates across time and space. One cow may be worth two pigs today, but may come to be worth four or ten pigs in the future. Once an object is considered not in terms of its use-value but in terms of its exchange value, “its existence as a material thing is put out of sight...we [also] put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in [the product], and the concrete forms of that labour” (Marx 1978[1972]:305). There is nonetheless a value attached to any given commodity, which Marx argues is determined by the “labour-time socially necessary for its production” (Marx 1978[1972]:306).

Commodities are equally valuable only so long as they can be produced in the same amount of time; they are “congealed labour-time” (Marx 1978[1972]:307). This labor value is measured qualitatively in terms of an object’s utility (will my plastic chair collapse beneath me, thus removing its use-value?) but quantitatively with respect to its exchange-value (how long did it take to build the chair?). It does not matter, in Marx’s analysis, how long it actually takes a given person to produce a chair; if a factory down the road can manufacture one in two hours, then that is its labour-time, and that is the price against which all chairs must be measured. The labor required to produce a chair, and thus its value, appears objective, an inherent physical quality of a chair or a pound of coffee, when it is actually the product of social relations. The buyer cannot see under what conditions the chair or the coffee were produced, only that it *was* produced – an omission that specialty coffee, particularly the subset of relationship coffee, seeks to remedy.

For the capitalist, the goal is not to create simply exchange value, to trade a cow for something of equal value. Rather the goal is to produce surplus value from the buying and selling of commodities: “he desires to produce a commodity whose value shall be greater than the sum of the values of the commodities used in its production, that is, of the means of production and the labour-power that he purchased with his good money in the open market” (Marx 1978[1972]:351). Otherwise there would be no profit, and no capital. Again, the *kind* of labor is irrelevant, only that it produces an object that can be exchanged for a value greater than what it cost to produce. Marx argues that surplus value is possible because the laborer is underpaid for his or her efforts; essentially, that the cost to the capitalist of labor-power for a given amount of time must be less than the value of what is created from that labor. This concept underpins the entirety of the capitalist world system, and it is one that is cause for concern among specialty industry purveyors, who want to see themselves as partners with farmers rather than as capitalists extracting value from workers. It is particularly evident in certification programs such as Fair Trade, discussed in some detail below.

Yet extracting value from underpaying farmers is not the only means with which to create surplus value. On the other end of the supply chain, baristas also must be underpaid in Marx’s sense, or the retail shop owner could not earn a profit. This, however, would be the case regardless of the type of coffee baristas were preparing. Because they are selling *specialty* coffee, however, there must be some clear distinction from conventional coffee, some explanation for why conventional coffee is not special and specialty is. This is done by tying the physical attributes of specialty coffee (e.g. Arabica, grown at altitude) to a narrative about that production (e.g. selectively harvested by a farmer who rides a horse to his fields and has three children in school). Quantitative differences such as bean size, varietal, altitude, etc. are combined with qualitative narrative difference so that these all seem to be equally intrinsic and inherent characteristics of a given coffee. Under this understanding, not only is it possible to extract additional value because of the inclusion of the narrative, but purveyors would argue that

they have also changed the coffee's use value altogether. Unlike conventional, specialty is not a caffeine or sugar delivery device: it is an *experience*. I turn now to a closer examination of the arguments that circulate within the specialty industry in order to understand why high-end specialty purveyors tell me – and the rest of the world – that they have de-commodified coffee altogether.

### ***Decommodifying Commodity Coffee?***

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The conventional coffees that dominated the U.S. market in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a textbook case of both commodities and the commodity fetish. Again, conventional coffee is processed with the express intention that the contents of every can of Maxwell House will taste the same regardless of the origin of the coffee itself; rather than highlighting labor and origin, both are intentionally made to disappear from the view of consumers. Given the high volumes in which conventional purveyors traffic, this obfuscation is a necessity: though they work hard to make coffee production as closely resemble factory production as possible, the fact remains that as an agricultural product there are a number of factors that are beyond the control of either buyers or producers. Because it takes three to five years for coffee to mature, farmers cannot simply step up production to meet looming deadlines; these decisions must be made years in advance. Moreover, quotas can be decimated by frosts or insects or disaster aboard a container ship. When this happens, conventional purveyors still need to meet consumer demand, and they do this by substituting one coffee (e.g. a Brazil) for another (e.g. a Vietnam). They also do it by controlling the roast so as to minimize flavor variation and by slowly changing taste profiles over time, in this case adding cheaper (and more resilient) robusta to blends to keep costs low.

In the case of conventional coffee the conditions of production are further abstracted because coffee's price is set by the New York Commodities ("C") Market, so that frosts in Brazil affect prices in Colombia regardless of Colombia's actual supply conditions. Labor costs and conditions thus become irrelevant, at least to everyone but the farmers; all that matters is the yield. It does not matter if Costa Rican farmers need to be paid more because of their country's higher cost of living, because all that

matters is the result of their labor, not the labor itself. Speculators, hedgers, investors, and green bean buyers for the major companies are not trading Costa Rican coffee, but coffee that has certain attributes: it can be delivered in May to Long Beach, there is X amount of it available, and it comes from a region known for its high acidity. Speculators and investors, as a general rule, care nothing for the coffee itself, but rather for the margins on which it is traded and how much they can make off its purchase and sale. Green bean buyers for the large companies are also tasked with reaping as much of a profit as possible while meeting these very general criteria.

The result of this blending and roasting and trading is that this coffee comes as close to Fordist conditions as possible; that is, “the manufacture of standardized products in huge volumes using special purpose machinery and unskilled labor” (Tolliday and Zeitlin 1987:1-2). Conventional coffee is grown under conditions approximating as closely as possible those of the factory: though there are certainly thousands of smallholders who sell to the conventional market, the majority of it comes from farms in Brazil and Vietnam that have either mechanized sowing and harvesting, or which have such low labor costs that they achieve the same price effect. Coffee farmers, whether large or small, are not rewarded for differentiation, as they might be with specialty: the only goal, at least from a buyer’s perspective, is to produce as consistent a crop as possible, both in terms of taste and yield. It is this Fordist mode of production that specialty purveyors have in mind when they refer disparagingly to conventional coffee as commodity coffee, and it is against this model that they see themselves working. It is not only the modes of production that they see as objectionable, but the anonymous nature of those modes, for specialty coffee’s surplus and exchange value comes from being able to tell the story of that coffee, to trace it back to a specific farm and farmer. Moreover, for these actors, specialty differs from conventional not only in terms of its surplus and exchange values, but also in its use value: their coffee, they would argue, is much more than a caffeine delivery device, and thus should be considered to be as different from conventional as it is from tea or soda or Red Bull.



In contrast to conventional or commodity coffee, specialty focuses on coffee origin as an inherent element of distinction, with consumers encouraged to learn the differences between Kenyan and Guatemalan flavor profiles. Unlike with products such as sugar or conventional coffee, the expectation is not only that the coffee can and does taste different depending on origin, processing, storage, and roast, but that consumers both expect and appreciate these differences. Not only are these differences pronounced in the cup, they are clear in the way that specialty is marketed and consumed: it is intended to bring together consumers and growers as well as to bring consumers together in coffeeshops. Anthropologist Heather Paxson argues that artisanal cheese follows a similar path, calling it an “unfinished commodity” in that its “unfinished character...calls attention to the instability, and hence open promise, of its heterogenous forms of value” (Paxson 2013:13). As with artisanal cheese, much of the rhetoric that surrounds specialty coffee revolves around the notion of coffee as an unfinished story, a narrative that is decidedly absent from commodity coffee marketing, which focuses primarily on price and secondly on taste, aroma, and the benefits of caffeine. In telling the coffee’s story, it is imbued with a collective life history, one whose facts can, in theory, be verified.

The ability to tell this story – to separate out some beans from others, despite almost no phenotypic variation – is what separates specialty from commodity coffee. As with cheese, instability is similarly an important part of the story. Objects that are easily replaced or resistant to damage are less valuable, in this narration, than those that are rare, and which have to be handled carefully and with great care and attention to detail. Should one tiny link in the very long chain fail, the possibility of a truly special specialty coffee will be lost, and it will be consigned to a category of consumption that acts as a failed promise. The thing-ness, then, of the coffee – its status as a special object – is obtained almost entirely through its narrative potential as an individual product (a Geisha from Finca La Esmeralda in Boquete, Panama) and as a piece of the larger specialty puzzle (its comparison to Geishas from other farms or other years). As I will discuss in the section on cupping in the next chapter, coffee must at once

stand on its own and be compared to every coffee the cupper has tasted before; the same is true for the story told about it. I want to be clear that this is not simply a marketing technique, a way to sell more widgets to an unsuspecting public, but that these ideas circulate internally at conferences and within social media, and that they become agentive in different ways in different segments of the industry.

In the years since Peet's and Starbucks first opened, specialty has grown almost exponentially, with a number of divisions appearing within this once narrowly-focused segment. There is high-end specialty, where buyers and consumers alike pay many times the "C" or New York market price for coffees they find extraordinary. There is the mid-grade specialty market, prevalent at most coffeeshops, where origin and roast are highlighted, but consumers are not asked to pay exceptionally high prices nor to understand or care very much about this variation. And there is Starbucks, which some have argued to me is no longer specialty coffee since it roasts its beans to intentionally obfuscate taste differences and which relies on automated machinery instead of a well-trained barista to produce espresso drinks. Despite these differences, however, what these three divisions have in common is a focus on highlighting, to varying degrees, the labor and artistry involved in producing a cup of coffee, on paying a higher price for quality, and on using the conditions of production as the basis of their marketing strategies. Anything less than perfection is not tolerated: every link in the supply chain must work together in a complex set of interactions in order to produce what is in the end a very simple beverage. Should even that one link fail, the entire batch is destined for destruction; even one bad bean in fifty (roughly the amount needed for an espresso) will throw off the taste of the drink, just as one bad egg in an omelet of fifty will ruin the meal (Francis and Francis 2006).<sup>52</sup> When all the parts are working together, specialty practitioners argue that something more than a drink results: each individual actor

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<sup>52</sup> Whether the batch is actually destroyed or not depends on the point at which this failure occurs. Poor harvesting, processing, or storage will usually result in a sale via the commodity market; badly roasted coffee will likely be thrown out or used for compost. Bad espresso shots, in which the grind was too fine or too coarse, are dumped down the drain almost before they have finished extracting into the glass. For more on waste in the specialty industry, see Townsend 2012.

has come together across the continents to produce specialty coffee, “a coffee that delivers satisfaction on all counts and adds value to the lives and livelihoods of all involved” (Rhinehart 2011:2).

On the surface, each segment of specialty appears to oppose the conventional treatment of coffee as a mass-produced, inherently commensurate commodity. After all, rather than obscuring the conditions of production and ignoring the labor required to transform a cherry into a drink, it focuses on these elements as key predictors and carriers of quality. In order to even be considered specialty, coffee must receive a score, known as the cup or cupping score, of at least 80; the determination of this score will be discussed in the next chapter. At the same time, individual beans are not separated out, and even the most expensive coffee is bought and sold for a profit. Though all coffee sold under the specialty denomination tells a kind of story about its origins and inherent characteristics, this narrative of de-fetishization – of “removing the veil” that separates consumers from producers and from labor – is strongest in relationship coffees, chief among them, Fair Trade.

### ***Relationship Coffees and the Commoditization of Connection in the Post-ICA Era***

Fair Trade and other “relationship coffees,” so-called because they are intended to create direct relationships between farmers and consumers, arose out of the ashes of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA), which collapsed in 1989. The ICA was a country-specific quota system that had helped keep coffee prices high since 1962, and its collapse led to devastatingly low prices worldwide (Mwandha, et al. 1985; Talbot 2004). Though generally referred to in the singular, the ICA was actually a series of agreements renegotiated by member countries every few years in accordance with changes in local yields and international demand. The agreement limited the number of bags<sup>53</sup> each country could export in a given year, preventing the market from having an imbalance between supply and demand, which would lower the price for all producers. Since coffee is shelf-stable and can be warehoused for up

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<sup>53</sup> Each bag contains 63 kilos, or 132 pounds, of green coffee. However, occasionally bags are measured in *quintales*, or 100 pounds. This variability makes price comparisons difficult.

to a year without declining in quality,<sup>54</sup> the international implementation of this system meant there was always sufficient supply on hand to respond to any downward production trends. The quota system was utilized along with price bands for each producing country. The bands set minimum and maximum prices not only by country, but also by altitude; since coffee's quality and price is altitude-determinant (Avelino, et al. 2005), this kept production relatively even across growing regions. The International Coffee Organisation, which managed the ICA, maintained what it calls an index price: when the price on the commodities market rose above the index, the quotas were relaxed and more coffee entered the market, lowering the price for buyers. If it fell below the price band, quotas would be tightened, restricting supply and therefore raising the New York commodity price (Mwandha, et al. 1985; Ponte 2004; Talbot 2004).

The system collapsed for a variety of reasons, among them disagreements over quotas and pricing; increased trading through non-member countries at lower prices; the fall of the Soviet Union and with it, U.S. fears that poorer countries would ally with the Soviets; and an increasingly fragmented market as more countries began producing coffee outside the ICA. The result was that world supply became flooded with coffee that had been previously warehoused, leading to an overall drop in prices from which the market has yet to recover (Daviron 1993; 1996; Daviron and Ponte 2007; Ponte 2004; Talbot 2004). In addition to no longer fearing Soviet alliances, the economic politics of the United States had shifted dramatically by 1989, and the anti-neoliberal manipulation of supply and demand was in direct opposition to the U.S. embrace of free-market policies.

The ICA had dampened price swings and protected farmers and the larger economy in which they were embedded; with its repeal, prices were free to swing wildly. This had devastating effects

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<sup>54</sup> There are disagreements about how long coffee can and should be shelved prior to roasting. For higher-end specialty, year-old coffee would be considered undesirable "old crop." A year would be acceptable for lower-end specialty. I asked Sherri, the Cup of Excellence trainer, whether the ICA's warehousing had affected coffee supply, as under that system bags could sometimes be warehoused for several years at a time. "There's a market for everything," she replied, even for four-year-old moldy coffee that tasted to her only of paper or wet cardboard. Even "papery" beans could be put to use in instant coffee, she explained.

worldwide: as prices dropped due to the release of quota coffee, farmers found themselves unable to hire workers or to buy goods, crippling local economies and triggering a Polanyian “double movement” (Polanyi, et al. 1971[1957]). That is, as prices drop in an unregulated market, farmers turn to the state for aid, leading to a return to regulation in order to alleviate the resulting social and economic crisis. Talbot writes that a double movement is only possible when Polanyi’s “fictitious commodities” – land, labor, and money – are treated in the same way as any other commodity, “with their prices determined solely by the unrestricted interplay of supply and demand...the extension of the self-regulating market on these terms created tendencies that were destructive of human society” (Talbot 2004:36). Certainly this proved to be the case; as neoliberal orthodoxy spread, states were increasingly divesting themselves of social programs and welfare protections. Farmers, and the socioeconomic systems in which they were embedded, were left with few resources. Costa Rica had more options than most, but fewer than it had had before.

Into this price free-fall stepped the specialty market, offering prices above the “C” price to those who could meet the 80-point minimum. As the specialty (Pendergrast 1999), “yuppie” (Roseberry 1996) or “latte” (Daviron and Ponte 2007) revolution took hold in the 1990s, the expansion of coffeeshops and the segmentation of coffee into finer and finer categories offered a path to increased world consumption, effectively increasing demand and therefore, in the newly deregulated coffee market, raising prices. As we have seen, in an increasingly crowded market coffee retailers had to find creative ways to distinguish their product from the dozens, if not hundreds, of competitors that crowded supermarket shelves and city sidewalks. And as coffee has become “a key symbol of the injustices of global capitalism” (Reichman 2008:108), the segments of specialty known variously as ethical, conscious, relationship, conscientious, alternative, direct, and fair(ly) trade(d) came into being.

Unlike other social justice movements tied to consumption, where consumers are frequently urged *not* to purchase a product made in a sweatshop or by child laborers, Fair Trade<sup>55</sup> focuses on the uplifting effects one's purchases will have for the farmers pictured on the bag; that is, it illuminates the means of production as a positive aspect of production rather than a negative one. "We don't want the poor to [continue to] get screwed" because they receive such a low price for their goods, write Litvinoff and Madeley (2007:1). Fair Trade was conceived as a way to put this inequality right, to "trade with a difference" and "take practical action to bring about a better, more generous world" (Litvinoff and Madeley 2007:1). By focusing on farmers and the contexts in which agricultural goods are grown, Fair Trade appears to be doing exactly what anthropologists have been exhorting consumers to do for decades: it is paying attention to inequalities in labor and the means of production, attacking unequal access to resources by alleviating poverty, and not relying on corporations to make ethical decisions without consumers demanding that they do so. Programs such as Fair Trade appear to be anti-neoliberal in that they aim to increase consumer awareness of their complicity in farmer poverty and to encourage "market-driven ethical consumption" (Nicholls and Opal 2005).

They are also anti-neoliberal in that they are "functionally similar" (Reichman 2008:111) to the ICA. Fair Trade implements price floors, guaranteeing producers in mainly agricultural industries a minimum price for their goods. For coffee, growers are paid \$1.40 per pound, plus a \$0.20 per pound social premium that can be invested as the cooperative sees fit (Fair Trade USA 2012). This strategy mimics that of the ICA by allowing farmers to predict the minimum price they will receive; moreover, if the price of coffee on the New York market rises above the Fair Trade minimum, growers will receive the higher price. The prices and standards are uniform across producing countries, allowing consumers to feel confident that whether their coffee comes from El Salvador or Kenya, growers have been treated

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<sup>55</sup> While Fair Trade is just one of a number of relationship coffee models, I focus on it here because it is a much larger program than the others, which are often unique to each roaster. It has also garnered much more academic and activist attention than other relationship coffee programs, making its claims to and evidence of success more readily available for analysis.

fairly, children have stayed in school, and farmers have been “empower[ed] to protect the environment” (Fair Trade USA 2013). In the absence of state intervention and ICA regulation, voluntary certifications like Fair Trade are intended to provide environmental and social oversight, mitigating the possibility of Polanyian double movements and allowing farmers to enter into direct relationships with consumers via the gap created by the ICA’s collapse (Bacon 2004:499; West 2012:45-46).

There are a number of retailers who sell only alternative, conscientious, or ethical coffees under their own labels and according to their own criteria. They operate at different scales: for example, Boulder, Colorado’s Conscious Coffee is only sold online and at two coffeeshops next to the University of Colorado campus, while Massachusetts retailer Equal Exchange sells to individuals and shops around the country. However, the majority of certified coffee is offered by large retailers, such as supermarkets, alongside their (apparently unfair) regular beans. Fair Trade certifications can also be combined with others, such as organic or bird friendly, to create “triple certified” coffee. The number and variety of options available to the conscientious consumer can be overwhelming, leading to ethical fatigue and in some cases, paralysis in the face of so many choices (Lyon 2010; Reichman 2011; West 2012).

### ***When Is a Commodity Not a Commodity?***

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Given this segmentation, specialty coffee is a unified category only in that it encompasses all coffee that is not “conventional,” but as we shall see, the case of Starbucks makes even that distinction blurry. In order to analyze the argument made by purveyors that their coffee is quantitatively and qualitatively different from conventional coffee, however, I will focus here on first describing the broad categories delineated above; that is, high-end specialty, specialty, and ethical or relationship coffee.

#### **Boutique Specialty Coffee**

Of all the cases presented here, high-end specialty coffee is least like a commodity, at least according to the industry’s notion of commodity as something that is commensurable or produced under Fordist conditions. From a Marxist perspective, total decommodification is impossible, though

defetishization might be possible under certain circumstances. Boutique specialty coffee occupies a tiny niche of the specialty segment, which itself amounts to roughly  $\frac{1}{4}$  of all coffee traded per year.<sup>56</sup> In this market, prices paid to farmers are not tied to the New York “C” price, but rather are determined either through bidding (as in the case of the Cup of Excellence) or through direct negotiation between buyer and seller. These prices are usually many times the going “C” price and are sold, both to buyers and to end consumers, in very small quantities. These coffees are not wholly commensurable, as they are available only in limited quantities and under specific conditions. Commensurability is desirable for large roasters and retailers, and refers to the fact that coffees from different regions and different varieties can offer similar taste profiles, particularly after blending and roasting. The ability to source a coffee from multiple locations is important for larger roasters, as it allows them to offer a consistent taste and price despite changes in availability (e.g. due to war, drought, or pests). Commensurability is why many large-scale retailers offer “Central American” or “breakfast” blends without delineating the specific makeup of that blend, and it is the antithesis of boutique coffee because it acts like a traditional commodity, obfuscating the labor, origin, and any truly intrinsic qualities that have inhered in the coffee (West 2012).

Regardless of claims to true noncommensurability, however, there must always be at least some mixing of potentially unlike objects. Coffee as a drink cannot be made from a single bean,<sup>57</sup> and though a single tree might produce enough cherries to yield a pound of green coffee, not even the most discerning retailer is trafficking in single-pound lots. Each buyer, therefore, sets the terms of acceptable commensurability: for some it might be all the Geisha trees on a single farm, or only the peaberries from Geisha trees on that farm.<sup>58</sup> For others it might be as broad as anything from a given farm, or a given

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<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately I have yet to find any figures that distinguish boutique sales from other specialty sales, and even the specialty numbers are contested.

<sup>57</sup> Espresso, the densest drink, requires an average of 50 beans to produce one ounce of coffee.

<sup>58</sup> I received a marketing email in June 2014 from Equator Coffees that offered 8 ounces of “Colombia Cerro Azul Gesha Peaberry” for \$25 plus shipping – a relatively high price considering that most shops in Boulder sell 12-16



region. As retail prices drop the level of acceptable commensurability rises until you reach the level of instant coffee, where buyers simply want anything that is considered coffee, no matter how old or overripe or badly stored.<sup>59</sup> The story that is told about the coffee becomes more and more generalized, so that details about individual farmers or parts of a farm blur until the producers themselves become invisible and only a few general characteristics of the coffee's flavor remain to be told. Some coffees towards the instant side of the spectrum eliminate even that, focusing instead on characteristics that have nothing to do with the bean itself, such as roast profile (e.g. "dark" or "hearty") or the time of day to be consumed (e.g. "breakfast blend").

At the other end of the spectrum from instant is Tim Wendelboe, a high-end Norwegian roaster/retailer (the name refers to both the man and his eponymous company) who is perhaps one of the best-known within the specialty industry for his work on quality in small quantities. To counter some of the obfuscation that surrounds sourcing and labor and demystify the commodity chain, he has attempted to create transparency and accountability by posting the prices paid for green coffee on his website (Tim Wendelboe 2014b). He is not alone in this practice, though it is far from common; in North Carolina, Counter Culture Coffee does the same (Counter Culture Coffee 2013). In addition to posting the Free on Board (FOB) price paid for coffee – that is, the price which includes the green coffee and its delivery in a container to a ship, but which does not include international shipping costs – both companies offer blog posts with substantive commentary on themes like sustainability, traceability, and responsibility. They see themselves working to shift coffee trade and consumption away from the anonymous, commensurable model and towards one that is more fair for all parties, without specifically

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ounces of coffee for about \$14. The description read: "This lot is **made up of peaberries**, a type of bean that results when the coffee fruit develops a single oval bean as opposed to the usual pair of flat-sided beans. Due to our close relationship with Café Granja La Esperanza, **Equator was able to secure this year's entire production** of peaberry grade Gesha from the Cerro Azul farm. Characterized by lush **floral-tones, cocoa and sweet orange.**" Emphasis in the original.

<sup>59</sup> And even that definition can include small sticks or bugs that make their way into the roaster by virtue of it not being worth the time and money to screen them out. Coffee roasted this way smells more like burning popcorn than anything else, and can be pre-mixed with sugar to hide the worst of the bad tastes.

labeling it “fair trade.” The “About” section of the Tim Wendelboe website explains this perspective in more detail:

Our coffees are imported as directly as possible from what we believe are the best coffee growers around the world. Rather than blending coffees together into a homogenous product we try to showcase the vast difference of flavours that the world of coffee has to offer. That is why we buy smaller coffee lots according to the harvesting season that we are currently in. Coffee is a fresh product and we try to provide our customers with the freshest coffee possible. Our coffees will therefore never stay the same but hopefully always improve.

All our coffees are carefully sourced based on a philosophy where quality, traceability, innovation and social responsibility is the main focus. Sustainability is very important to us and we try to satisfy both our customers as well as our suppliers when we buy our coffee. (Tim Wendelboe 2014a)

Based on conversations with coffee drinkers who are not involved in the coffee industry, I have found that few of them think of coffee as an agricultural crop, never mind one that might be seasonal. Although coffee can only be grown in the tropics, nonetheless its growing and harvest season varies from region to region, so that Central American coffees are ready for harvest while African coffees are still maturing. Yet more than sixty years of commensurable sourcing by the major retailers has further alienated consumers from thinking of coffee in the same way that they might think of tomatoes or strawberries,<sup>60</sup> so retailers like Tim Wendelboe have to counteract this misunderstanding at the same time that they are educating consumers about the variability in flavors and preparation methods.

Tim Wendelboe may be somewhat unusual in publishing its pricing information, but not in its conception of coffee as heterogeneous, rather than commensurable. If coffees offered by retailers “never stay the same,” and if a particular coffee’s flavor profile makes it more or less desirable than another, then it cannot be a strictly Fordist product in the same way as jeans or laptops or pencils. To achieve this level of heterogeneity, however, requires each person along the chain to take great care and to maintain a level of separation from coffee destined for a more commensurable market. In the

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<sup>60</sup> Of course, grocery stores in the United States contribute to this phenomenon by being able to source seasonal foods year-round; while hot-house tomatoes purchased in January might not taste the same as fresh summer tomatoes, they nonetheless are there for consumption. This is simply one more way in which U.S. consumers in particular are alienated from the forces and realities of agricultural production.

next chapter I will discuss this separation in terms of quality and its ramifications for farmers, but for now I want to point out that non-commensurable coffee requires conventional coffee to exist in order for it to have something to work against. Boutique retailers in particular are trafficking in “specialness,” and it would be impossible for their coffee to be special if it were the only option available.

Value, for these retailers, comes in part from the flavonoids that distinguish their coffee from others, but it also comes from the ability to tell the story of where this coffee came from and why it is distinct from that found in Folgers. It is the very inconsistency of availability that produces the virtue and distinction that makes this coffee artisanal and transitory, rather than the solidly material stuff of conventional coffees that are endlessly predictable. Coffee’s seasonality and the limitations to its storage are also part of its value: unlike wine or whiskey, which gain value through proper aging (becoming rare by virtue of being the last man standing), specialty coffee has to be consumed within a very limited window of opportunity. It must “rest” after drying and roasting, but not for too long; most roasted coffee is sold with a best-by date only a few weeks out. If its temporality is recognized properly at each stage, if each person has done their job, then the experience will result in “finding God in the cup,” as in Weissman’s book – but it is impossible to know if this is the case until the coffee is actually tasted. Each cupping is a surprise, and it is in pursuit of the best surprise that all this work is undertaken.

The result is that although boutique retailers might engage with the language of defetishization, they are in fact trafficking in the fetish to add and claim surplus value for both themselves and for farmers, who can earn many times the going “C” price for coffee that meets retailer standards and which can be directly traced back to a particular point on the farm. This traceability is so important to the narrative that Tim Wendelboe reports on Twitter that he is experimenting with geotagging coffee on some farms in Mexico: there is power in the ability to trace coffee literally back to the trees on which it was grown. This kind of coffee, then, far from being defetishized, imbues the coffee with increasing power and agency to act and create meaning on behalf of humans. Having been given this power,

specialty coffee then appears to act on its own: the power of the fetish is such that the strings with which humans control coffee are no longer visible, so that people are no longer responsible or in charge of determinations of quality and betterness. These designations thus appear to come from the coffee itself even while they create deep anxieties in the humans who traffic in it. There is a strong desire to believe that while conventional coffees are commodified and fetishized, the higher price and more direct relationship with farmers, as well as the traceability and seasonality of the product itself means that specialty is exempt from such criticism, and that the strings do not exist at all – that this is not the result of human agency deciding what to value, but rather is an objective, inherent characteristic that comes from specialty's particular relationships with nature and nurture.

And it is seen as a criticism. Trafficking in conventional coffee is for the most part scorned as the pursuit of wealth and the ordinary, rather than the artistic work of love and craftsmanship that specialty industry members see themselves engaging in. Each year the various competitions held around the world grow more and more elaborate, as baristas, roasters, and brewers seek to distinguish themselves from each other and from what has been done before. In 2014 Brewers Cup finalist Todd Carmichael, who hosts the show “Dangerous Grounds” on the Travel Channel, revealed a device he called “the dragon” that would produce a smoother cup than other brewing methods. Pictures and commentary swirled around Twitter and other social media forums as users wondered what would be needed to top this invention.

Certainly “ordinary” coffee could never be brewed in a device called “the dragon,” but despite these claims towards a different kind of authenticity than that offered by conventional coffee, despite the prevailing narrative that “coffee is love” and that no one is in it for the money, the result is that boutique specialty coffee reinforces rather than reduces the commodity fetish. That is, while certain curtains are pulled back in its production, others remain firmly in place. Tim Wendelboe and Counter Culture’s public pricing information notwithstanding, much of the work of production remains obscured.

The processors, the importers, customs agents, truck drivers, bag manufacturers and plumbers that, among others, worked to make this coffee possible are still invisible, and the surplus value that is extracted at the point of sale to the customer is much greater than that offered to the farmer upon purchase. Moreover, this kind of coffee takes on even more of a life of its own than “ordinary” specialty coffee, becoming imbued with properties that have value beyond their exchange value. The seasonality of coffee is highlighted as a selling point for the discerning consumer, but its very ephemerality is employed to argue for transcending the merely utilitarian purpose of consuming caffeine or whetting one’s thirst. Ephemerality, carefully managed variation, and the narrative of traceability and partnership all work to add surplus value for farmers (who earn higher FOB prices), retailers (who can sell it at a higher price) and for consumers (who have an improved experience over that afforded by Nespresso).

The search for the perfect coffee, as Weissman describes in her book, takes on spiritual, quasi-religious overtones; Carmichael’s own show depicts his search for amazing coffees hidden in the wild places of the world where only those who are driven by such an inexhaustible quest can penetrate. Again, while some of the labor that goes into producing such coffee is highlighted, even celebrated as explanatory for higher prices or better quality, the connection between producers and consumers is nonetheless through the commodity itself, rather than personal interaction. Indeed, as the coffee is imbued more and more of these qualities of rarity and difficulty (in procuring, separating, and preparing), the farmers themselves grow ever more alienated from it: while all the Costa Rican farmers I know have drunk their own coffee, most do so along with copious quantities of sugar and milk, and it is always of the lowest grade, that which is not considered suitable for export. For them coffee is about caffeine, but also about family and social relationships, a topic I will explore more fully in later chapters.

### **Starbucks: No Longer Specialty?**

What, then about coffee that does not fall under the purview of what one roaster, Piper, calls “coffee for the 1%?” The easiest target of criticism within the industry is Starbucks, which has grown

from those few shops in Seattle in the early 1970s to be one of, if not the, most recognized coffee brand names in the world. Within the coffee industry, any discussion involving Starbucks is hotly contested. It was a major sponsor of the 2014 SCAA conference, and that alone was enough to make some shake their heads, while others praised the company's contributions. On the one hand, its meteoric rise has created a tremendous demand for specialty coffeeshops by offering up a "third place" that is neither home nor work (Bookman 2012; Simon 2011). The company has been lauded for its treatment of part-time employees, its support for gay rights, and by some, at least, for its anti-concealed-weapons stance. Much of Orosi's coffee ends up at Starbucks; the local mill is now owned by ECOM, a multinational trading company that sources for Starbucks. During a tour of the mill in 2009, two employees asked me if I had heard of "Estarbus," the company that they said had done so much for them via an environmental standards incentives program.

On the other hand, Starbucks is known for targeting local coffeeshops and aggressively expanding its business at their expense. More importantly for this discussion, however, is its treatment of the coffee itself. Almost all of Starbucks' drip and espresso roasts are very dark, to the point where specialty purveyors have told me it is "burnt," "charcoal," or "ashy," signs of what they consider to be overroasting. This is not simply a taste preference: the darker the roast, the less its taste will vary due to differences in water temperature, mineral content, or storage.<sup>61</sup> That is, the delicate florals or earthy tones that roasters like Piper and Tim Wendelboe are attempting to highlight with their coffees are deliberately muted by Starbucks. It is hard to blame Starbucks for such a move. With thousands of stores in dozens of countries, its sales and client base are predicated on the idea of consistency, rather than the rapid, seasonal variation on offer at Tim Wendelboe. After all, the entire concept is based around the customer's certain knowledge that a Starbucks drink in the Denver airport will taste the same as one in Honolulu or Costa Rica or England. While, like other multinational brands, Starbucks does make a few

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<sup>61</sup> Contrary to popular belief, darker roasts also have a lower percentage of caffeine than their more lightly-roasted counterparts.

changes at the local level to better appeal to customers, to my knowledge these changes are relatively superficial. Many have to do with shop infrastructure, such as the number and placement of outlets, chairs, and the like; in Costa Rica, for example, there were only two people using electronic devices in the Starbucks I visited, so the need for outlets is much less than it is in the United States. Starbucks locations will also bow to local tastes by offering slightly different combinations in their drinks and in the to-go food items, and those in countries where coffee is grown will generally offer single-origin coffee from that country. The roast stays the same, as does nearly everything else within the shop. In the locations I have visited in Guatemala and Costa Rica, almost the entire menu is in English, with prices similar to that of the U.S. and only a few details translated into Spanish. By darkly roasting their coffee and moving to mechanized espresso machines (rather than the manual or semi-automatics preferred by most coffeeshops), Starbucks is attempting to remove as much of the variability from the coffee equation as possible. This is not to say that each of their coffees tastes the same; even with a darker roast, some of the coffee's acidity and flavor profile appears in the cup, but this variation is minimal compared to that of the higher-end retailers.

One woman who had worked in management and quality control for Starbucks during the 1980s told me she had left the company because it was "no longer about the coffee." For Laura, as I will call her, the company had gotten away from its roots as a specialty retailer and was too focused, in her opinion, on expansion of their retail shops rather than the quality of their product. She wasn't interested in hearing about the "third space;" Laura did not think a coffeeshop that was not fully invested in delivering the finest quality coffee should be considered a coffeeshop. Setting aside the question of whether there is room for a variety of coffee retailers in the marketplace, what implications do Starbucks' roasting practices have for understanding the commodity fetish?

Starbucks does focus customer attention on coffee's origins, and it has released a number of lighter roast profiles in recent years, likely as a response to complaints about the burnt taste of its

coffee. One, however, the “blonde roast,” has the same effect as the overroasted dark profile: by barely roasting the coffee, very few of the flavors are able to emerge, resulting in a similarly undifferentiated taste in the cup. Yet the volume in which Starbucks trades means that it is unable to offer coffees from a single farm, as Tim Wendelboe does; its scale requires that its coffees come from multiple sources, even if they are all within the same region. It is not trading on variability or seasonality, but on predictability. There is also an almost cultish aspect to Starbucks patronage: knowledge of its terminology, which veers sharply away from industry standards, lets customers feel like they are members of a club, albeit a very large one in which they know very few of their fellow members (Mathieu 1999). They know how to order off its complex menu and there is security in knowing that this menu will not change regardless of where one is in the world. The heterogeneity and attention to differentiation so prized by the Tim Wendelboes is replaced by a different kind of knowledge. Instead of having to choose a coffee’s origin, varietal, processing method, and preparation method – all factors which affect taste, and which, in a Tim Wendelboe shop, change regularly – patrons can simply order a “tall caramel macchiato, no whip” whether they are in San José or Seattle.

Starbucks does occasionally offer public cupping sessions in which customers can try out different varietals or origins, and all employees are required to participate, whether they are baristas or executive directors. ECOM employees in Costa Rica confirmed that Starbucks does indeed hold its producers to certain quality standards; as the final chapter will demonstrate, those who do not meet those standards are in danger of losing Starbucks as a buyer. Drinking a coffee from Starbucks is still a different experience than in a diner or out of one’s own coffeemaker at home. The surplus value here comes, however, not from some inherent or imposed property of the bean, or from a claim against mass production. It is instead actually a claim *of* mass production: no matter where you are in the world, if you see the green mermaid you can invoke your right of membership in this club and be served a drink that is comforting and familiar. The high prices (compared to diner or home-brewed coffee) keep it from



being a club that anyone can join; indeed, when Starbucks was preparing to open in Costa Rica, those who were in favor of it told me that they were glad to finally be able to drink the same coffee that they saw people drinking on TV. Costa Rica, one said, was finally able to “join the club” of countries that were wealthy or distinguished enough to support Starbucks (there are now four locations, all in wealthier suburbs of San José). It is the right kind of mass production: your drink is still prepared for you, according to your requests (e.g. soy milk, no foam), and as long as you speak the Starbucks language, you can have that same drink in Denver and Dubai. Starbucks’ surplus value is, again, not in the bean, but in the entirety of the experience that it is able to offer. Certainly other large specialty retailers, such as Caribou Coffee, Peet’s, Dunkin’ Donuts, or Tim Horton’s, can also be subjected to this same critique, but Starbucks’ size and its famous dark roast make it the easiest space in which to consider these questions of value in specialty coffee.

### **Certified Coffees and the Commodification of Connection**

While boutique coffee purveyors sell taste and distinction, and Starbucks sells predictability and a third space, certified coffees sell connection. Above all Fair Trade’s marketing and rhetoric, as well as its goals, focuses on the conditions of production and the ways in which consumers can improve those conditions, “simply by choosing to do it” (TransFair USA 2006). In some respects, this focus on production and on producers might seem to defetishize or decommoitize this coffee for consumers, asking them to think about how their coffee got to them and whether the price they pay for it is truly fair. These conditions – and their potential for improvement – are sold as inherent characteristics of the coffee. “Whereas conventional commodity exchange grinds down differences in the process of production to equate units of labor, fair trade attempts the opposite, presenting as unequal what is unequal – the qualities of the labor process and human transformations of labor” (Hudson and Hudson 2003:427). This is an unusual move in advertising: jeans manufacturers, for example, are not touting unfair working conditions as selling points for their product. When consumers are informed of laborer

inequality for products like jeans or sweatshirts, it is always raised as a complaint against manufacturers, coupled with a call for boycotting or for supporting a different company. Interestingly, purveyors of Fair Trade coffee are in essence calling themselves and consumers out for supporting an unfair, unequal system. Though the word “boycott” is never used, the message is always that certified coffee is more fair than non-certified coffee, and therefore, consumers should “vote with their dollars” and express their solidarity with producers (TransFair USA 2006).

As many scholars have noted, however, this connection and call to action is one-way (farmers are not given pictures of consumers) and mediated by glossy brochures and sanitized websites (Fisher 2007; Fridell 2007; Hudson and Hudson 2003; Jaffee 2007; Linton 2012; Lyon 2007; Reichman 2008; Smith 2007; West 2010). After all, “the object of fair trade is to induce sales, not to make potential consumers uncomfortable” (Hudson and Hudson 2003:426). Moreover, as the Fair Trade: The Story (TransFair USA 2006) marketing video notes, “Fair Trade is easy.” Consumers are not asked to radically rethink the larger conditions of trade or the histories of colonialism and racism that make programs like Fair Trade necessary; they are asked, instead, to simply buy more of the right product. Fair Trade goods – coffee, but also tea, honey, vanilla, and a host of other agricultural products – sit alongside “unfair” products on store shelves, making them easy for consumers to buy but difficult to mentally separate from other, functionally similar items. And as new labels and certifications appear on those shelves, claiming to certify environmental, economic, social, or gendered conditions of inequality, it becomes harder and harder for even the most dedicated consumer to understand what each label means and how to choose between them. Does buying Rainforest Alliance-certified coffee – which guarantees environmental and workplace hazard conditions, but not price – mean sacrificing a Fair Trade farmer? What about companies like Conscious Coffee, which do not offer a guarantee, but whose packaging tells a story of inequity remedied through consumption? There is only so much space on a coffee bag, and so much energy available to a consumer to make choices.

Hudson and Hudson argue that it is difficult to imagine a program like Fair Trade disengaging from the commodity fetish so long as it is consumed within a Northern context of alienation and disassociation from the realities of production (Hudson and Hudson 2003:428). It also asks consumers to think about fairness and inequality as a global generality; because Fair Trade's idea of "fairness" is a synonym for "sameness," the price and the requirements for participation are the same everywhere in the world, regardless of local costs of living or differing labor needs. The Global South is rendered as an undifferentiated space of poverty, child labor, and gendered inequality, where one brown or black face can stand in for another because they are all equally being helped by Northern generosity.

Additionally, although the focus on farmers and inequality is indeed laudable, Fair Trade marketing still alienates both farmers and consumers from the end results of those conditions of production. Although certified coffees point to improved quality for goods produced under their label, there is disagreement over whether this may be the case; while Fair Trade marketing points to a "better cup of coffee" (TransFair USA 2006), coffee buyers, retailers, and consumers with whom I have spoken disagree. "If they had better coffee, they wouldn't need Fair Trade," one U.S. expat living in Guatemala told me. He has personal relationships with the farmers that supply the coffee he roasts in Panajachel, a popular tourist destination on Lake Atitlán. "They could get a higher price than Fair Trade just on their quality alone. Fair Trade is charity." I pointed out that not all farmers have access to boutique buyers willing to pay premium prices for premium coffee, and that as a roaster living in Guatemala he had unusual access to observe the conditions of production for himself on a daily basis, rather than relying on an annual inspection by a third party. He was unconvinced. "Charity," he said again, pulling me an espresso shot. "You can't get coffee that tastes that good with Fair Trade."

Regardless of whether Fair Trade coffee really is of higher quality or whether it is a charitable donation to farmers without the right material conditions to grow great coffee – a claim I will address in the fifth chapter – the fact remains that none of the connection that is being sold by its certifiers and

purveyors is at all connected biologically or economically to the coffee itself. While Hudson and Hudson find that Fair Trade comes short of fully demystifying and defetishizing coffee, but feel that it is nonetheless a good start towards that goal (Hudson and Hudson 2003), I would argue that this rhetoric in fact adds another layer of separation between farmer, commodity, and consumer. Like boutique coffee, where the commodity comes to take on almost spiritual qualities, certified coffee also traffics in a language of morality and duty that is wholly disconnected from the form or the function of the object itself. Though again, I laud any attempt to teach consumers more about the places from which their commodities come, I find it hard to agree with Hudson and Hudson's conclusion. The effect is more like that of a magician who convinces the audience to look in one direction while he or she effects a transformation in the other. Fair Trade may indeed be pulling back the curtain slightly on certain elements of production, but it is doing the opposite with respect to the larger contexts in which coffee is produced, processed, traded, and consumed.

### **"Ordinary" Specialty and the Harried Consumer**

"Ordinary" specialty coffees – those not sold at boutique prices, but which are nonetheless differentiated from conventional coffees by their packaging and place of sale – are even more difficult to generalize than the other categories described here. This coffee might be sold at Panera or McDonald's, bought at Safeway or King Sooper's for at-home consumption, or even consumed on an airline.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, I will attempt to draw a few conclusions about the commodity fetish for coffees in this category.

"Ordinary" specialty may or may not depict farmers as part of their marketing, but will usually draw consumers' attention to the country or region of origin in some way. There is, again, a great deal of

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<sup>62</sup> Though I could never recommend that anyone drink airline coffee, mainly because my flight attendant friends have told me horror stories about the cleanliness of the water pipes and brewing carafes on board. Coffee enthusiasts used to bring their own coffee-brewing kits to combat this tragedy: they would fill a thermos with hot water at an airport restaurant, then proceed to grind coffee with a hand grinder and to decant it into an AeroPress and travel mug. As of June 2014, the FAA has banned in-seat coffee making, claiming that it presents a hazard in the case of turbulence.

variation. While Caribou Coffee offers a “breakfast blend,” the bag (available at Target) specifies that it is comprised mainly of Costa Rican coffees. Panera’s breakfast blend is more diverse, mixing Central American-origin beans with those from Kenya; bagged Panera coffee can be purchased at the shop, though it is mostly sold as a prepared drink to its food customers. Though both at least make some attempt to highlight the origin of their coffees, they nonetheless maintain the distance between farmer and consumer, and between labor and product of that labor. While consumers may come to have a preference for one blend or another, in conversations with me they often have difficulty parsing out whether their preference is for the coffee’s origin, its roast, or the preparation method (Townsend 2012). The mid-market specialty buyers are often more price-sensitive than their high-end peers, but unlike with other commodities such as oil or milk, retail coffee prices do not fluctuate each time the “C” price dips or increases. This is due in part to the reliance on futures contracts, so that buyers know months in advance what their costs will be; it is also due to the suspicion with which the U.S. consumer has historically regarded such price shifts, amenable to them only in certain select industries (Pendergrast 1999; Talbot 2004).

There is thus little room for purveyors to maneuver; if their sales prices are relatively fixed, they cannot offer higher prices to farmers without either losing profit or shifting budgets elsewhere in the business. “Ordinary” specialty thus must walk the line between offering quality coffee at a premium price without boxing themselves too tightly into a particular regional category. It is neither as broadly described as conventional coffee nor as specific as boutique; flavor descriptions tend to be sweeping (“fruity” rather than “lychee”), and surplus value comes more from identification with a particular brand name or with the ease of acquiring it than with the coffee itself. The coffee’s properties are secondary to whether it can be purchased ready-made on the go (e.g., at Panera or McDonald’s) or along with other items (e.g., at Target). It is difficult for retailers working with this market to claim greater surplus value from better beans, or rather, there is a cap on that value due to market and taste forces that cannot be

easily exceeded. The result is that many purveyors work instead to increase their quantity of coffee sold, rather than extracting the maximum premium with respect to quality. Indeed, these coffees are often blended to taste better with milk than their boutique counterparts, to whom such an adjustment would be seen as abhorrent. For example, Piper, a roaster and one of the participants in the Honduras Cup of Excellence training, owned a boutique shop in Austin. She told me that she resisted offering syrups and flavoring in her coffee for years, because her coffee wasn't meant to be consumed that way. She relented only after it became clear that despite offering "coffee for the 1%," she wouldn't be able to survive with only high-end consumers. Though she saw adding flavoring and changing some of her blends as "giving in" to less-refined palates, in the end she had to do it or risk losing her business.

### ***Re-Fetishizing the Commodity***

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In a recent article in Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper, one columnist referred to boutique coffee as "fetishism at its most ludicrous" (Deveny 2013), due to what he saw as excessive attention to origin and preparation. Though each of the categories of specialty coffee described here – boutique, Starbucks, certified, and ordinary – takes a different tack with respect to the labor of production and the commodity's final value, in the end none of them succeed in fully defetishizing their coffee. Surplus value, in each category, comes from some different characteristic of the coffee, whether from its taste, the social setting in which it is consumed, the sense of connection to a far-off producer, or the predictability and ease of consumption. They are each nonetheless unfinished commodities, in no small part because coffee has to go through a number of transformations from the time it leaves the tree to the time it is consumed as a beverage. To even speak of "the means of production" as a single space or moment in time is to ignore these transformations and the work required by millers, exporters, roasters, and baristas (or home coffeemakers) in creating a drinkable product.

As specialty coffee has grown to account for roughly 20% of all coffee sales, its purveyors have had to find new ways to explain, and then to prove, quality to their customers. When specialty coffee

was only available at places like Peet's, it was feasible for the owner himself to serve much of what was ordered and to explain to individuals the differences between specific coffees. This kind of service is still present at high-end boutique shops like Blue Bottle or Tim Wendelboe, but not only is it impractical or undesirable at high-volume to-go type shops, it is impossible to replicate for consumers who buy their coffee at retail shops or online. The personal, one-on-one experience that once characterized specialty has to be mediated through the commodity, and the commodity has to be able to "speak for itself" about its apparently intrinsic characteristics. That is, rather than defetishizing coffee and seeing the commodity for what it is – an accretion of labor and negotiated ideas about value – it has instead become imbued with new kinds of agency that requires particular kinds of knowledge to operate. In the next chapter, I examine the various ways in which the proof of quality and connection is tested and substantiated, and in the following chapters explain the impact of both on farmers in Costa Rica.

## Chapter Four: Taste, Distinction, and the Science of Quality

In May 2014, U.S. champion barista and Barista Guild council member Lorenzo Perkins cupped five of the country's biggest (by sales volume) conventional coffees: Folgers, Maxwell House, Community, Chock Full o' Nuts, and Yuban. His idea was to regain a "global perspective" that he felt he had lost by only drinking specialty coffee (Gentile 2014b), that is, to remind himself of what other coffee tasted like. Though the plan was to score them just as he would any other coffee, he found himself unable to do so: he reportedly gagged several times during the cupping, and his descriptions were rather more lyrical than those usually found on score sheets. Maxwell House, the lowest-ranked coffee, was described as "what death tastes like" with flavors of "fish oil" and "despair." Folgers came in third: it had the aromas of "unhappy children" and "wet wool," with "charred, wet cardboard, and artificiality" and "taste[d] like someone sprayed coffee flavor onto coffee beans."<sup>63</sup> In second place, Chock Full O'Nuts might have smelled like "burnt hair," but Perkins noted that he "wouldn't return it if I was eating in a Denny's." Community Coffee, the "winner" of the taste test, smelled like "wet paper" but had "actual acidity, oh-sweet-surrender and mercy" and was worthy, in Perkins' estimation, of inclusion in the low-grade specialty category. Perkins re-cupped a several-hours-old specialty coffee at the end of the trial; though he had "originally considered the batch foul by his normal standards, after a few hours of cupping the big [conventional] brands...it was suddenly really, really good" (Gentile 2014b).

In August 2014, Perkins tried his experiment again. This time he cupped "second-wave" coffee. Author Gentile describes the difference between conventional and second-wave using the typical irreverence of coffee bloggers and enthusiasts: "In the spectrum of coffee, the two poles are the crappy grounds your parents drink and the new-school roasters who're trekking through jungles to find the fairest of traded beans. But in between exists a middle ground: the second-wave roasters, who brought

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<sup>63</sup> Which is not unthinkable, given the development of artificial aromas described in chapter three.



espresso drinks to the masses despite their inability to spell even the simplest names<sup>64</sup> (Gentile 2014a). In this test, Perkins cupped seven coffees, with two ringers: one was “crappy coffee” winner Community Coffee, and the other was a Counter Culture coffee from Bolivia, which ranked highest in the blog’s earlier poll of self-described “coffee geeks.” Community placed sixth; Counter Culture ran away with the lead. All but the Counter Culture were described as lacking acidity, while the bottom three “didn’t taste like anything.”

Perkins’ tests were a source of amusement and “I told you so” posts and tweets throughout the specialty coffee community, but they demonstrate the ways in which particular narratives and taste preferences are created and then circulated to a wider audience. The differences between Community Coffee and Counter Culture might have seemed obvious to the tweeters and Facebook posters who sent around the link, but they are hardly natural or intrinsic: why, for example, is a lack of acidity automatically a detrimental feature? In this chapter, I build on the arguments of the last chapter, in which I discussed surplus value in specialty coffee as being produced through narratives that trace coffee life histories in particular ways and to meet particular goals, linking quality of life for consumers and farmers with quality coffee. Here, I look more closely at the ways in which these narratives are shaped and in which they are converted into provable and discrete facts, as well as the anxieties that surround this production. I begin by examining the construction of notions of quality within the specialty coffee industry and the forms through which the industry has resisted and at times, embraced technology designed to remove human error from quality determinations. I argue that what constitutes “quality” has changed dramatically over the past thirty years, spurred on by the collapse of coffee prices in 1989, the need for exporters, roasters, and retailers to prove to each other – and to consumers – that their coffee is the best or the “most unique,” and by the awkward position of specialty purveyors as being at once producers, retailers, and consumers of coffee as well as the arbiters of distinction. The

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<sup>64</sup> A reference to Starbucks baristas frequently misspelling customer names on their to-go cups.

focus here on the technical and scientific characteristics and arguments that are marshalled to prove this distinction lays the groundwork for the next two chapters, which look more specifically at people, marketing, and the ways in which the distinctions that matter today have become classed and raced.

This is not to say that all coffee is the same and there is no reason to differentiate between it, or that specialty purveyors are engaged in the business of obfuscation, or that consumers should not think about the producers who grow their coffee – far from it. The distinctions are indeed real, but what is valued, and what commands a higher price, has not only changed over time, but as it has changed specialty coffee, as an industry, has constructed an elaborate quasi-scientific apparatus to demonstrate the veracity of such claims. This apparatus centers on the tautological use of blind cupping to determine a coffee's quality and thus, price and desirability: coffees that score higher are objectively better because they achieved a higher score than their conventional brethren. This logic is problematic at best, but with a few exceptions, the solution is seen as designing better cupping score sheets rather than questioning the process itself. It is by using this apparently objective, scientific analysis of quality-as-cupping-score combined with the narratives of people and place that specialty coffee can claim surplus value over conventional coffees, maintaining the malleability of this “unfinished commodity.”

### ***Taste and Consumer Expectations***

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When Roseberry published his article on “yuppie” coffee in the United States in 1996, he wrote that such coffee was aimed at “urban, urbane, professional men and women who distinguish themselves through consumption and who consume or hope to consume variety and quality, as well as quantity” (Roseberry 1996:773). Almost twenty years later, the landscape of distinction for coffee consumers has changed, though the desire and ideals have not. At the time, Starbucks was, though by no means a new company, already growing by leaps and bounds across the country, and flavored coffee (either via roasting or the addition of syrups) was all the rage. Syrups permitted shops to offer a wider range of drinks than they would otherwise, and perhaps more importantly, to compete with soft drinks

for customers (Roseberry 1996:770). Coffee might be the “beverage of postmodernism” (Roseberry 1996:770), providing insights into the “brave new world” in which one “can consume a bit of Sumatra, Darjeeling, France, and Mexico in [the] home, perhaps at the same time.” In this section, I look at some of the ways in which distinction is created and managed on the consumption side, concluding with a discussion of Roseberry’s “vicarious experience of the world’s geography,” which he describes as “not *just* a simulacrum; it depends on a quite real, if mediated and unacknowledged, relationship with the rural toilers without whom my choice could not be exercised” (Roseberry 1996:772).

As Bourdieu (1984) argues, the act of defining taste and taste preference is never an apolitical process, and it cannot be separated out from the social and class positions of cuppers, who face multiple challenges in reaching their goal of objectivity. For one, while there is acknowledgement that these preferences can vary among individuals – hence the emphasis on bringing in judges from around the world for the Cup of Excellence competitions – nonetheless these evaluations, with real economic ramifications, are conducted by those who have spent years training their palates and thinking quite deliberately about sensory characteristics in ways that the vast majority of consumers have not.<sup>65</sup> Trained cuppers, whether they work as buyers, roasters, or baristas, occupy a very small niche in what is already a niche market: recall that specialty-grade coffee makes up only 20% of all coffee sales. And while the same critique might be applied to sommeliers, who have also spent hundreds of hours developing a palate, there are two critical differences between wine and coffee. The first is that coffee’s history in the United States is that of a proletarian caffeine delivery device, with consumer expectation that it be as ubiquitous, cheap, and undifferentiated as possible. The second is preparation. Though

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<sup>65</sup> After nine years of working in coffee, I still have a very difficult time picking out even the most obvious characteristics because I simply have not focused on consumption in the same way. In fact, for most of my academic career I tried hard *not* to develop a palate: I wanted to like everything that was served to me, whether it was with a gallon of milk or a pound of sugar or prepared in the dirtiest, cheapest Mr. Coffee. In recent years I have tried to pay more attention to taste, and have spent more time cupping, but so far the only result I can see is that I am more aware of when coffee tastes bad to me, while I still struggle to articulate flavors. I know that two coffees taste different from each other, and I may even have a preference, but I do not necessarily know why.

there are steps to take in pouring wine – serving at the proper temperature, decanting into the right vessel, and so on – the wine nonetheless arrives in the bottle in the same form as which it will be consumed. Coffee, on the other hand, still has to go through a number of transformations, all of which have a tremendous impact on the final taste. Coffee, perhaps even more so than beer or wine, is delicate, and the way many people have dealt with the negative characteristics that they think are inherent to the bean, rather than resulting from improper storage or preparation, is to hide or minimize them with milk, sugar, and syrups.<sup>66</sup>

As Bourdieu writes in *Distinction*, “intellectuals and artists are...divided between their interest in cultural proselytism, that is, winning a market by widening their audience, which inclines them to favor popularization, and concern for cultural distinction, the only objective basis of their rarity; and their relationship to everything concerned with the ‘democratization of culture’ is marked by a deep ambivalence” (Bourdieu 1984:229). This division, or perhaps better said, conflict of interest, is certainly present within the specialty coffee industry, and not only around the cupping table. On the one hand, specialty coffee elites<sup>67</sup> gain status within the industry by winning competitions dedicated to taste and preparation, thus demonstrating their mastery of desirable skills. Mark, the Kaladi Coffee owner, was convinced that the recent preference for both natural process and coffees that were high in malic acid – once considered a problem, and now celebrated – came from events like the Cup of Excellence and SCAA conferences, and the rise of new, professional organizations such as the Barista Guild and

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<sup>66</sup> For many high-end shop owners, this is an anathema that they have to accept in order to have any customers at all. Some do this with more grace than others, and in past years I have noticed an increasing acceptance of customer choice when it comes to coffee preparation. In part this is, I think, due to the recent proliferation of single-brew methods that allow people to make truly excellent coffee at home for very little money. Baristas and consumers alike have been experimenting with different variables and posting the results of those experiments online, and the fact that one does not need a \$14,000 espresso machine with special electrical and plumbing lines to recreate those experiments at home has only increased their reach.

<sup>67</sup> By “specialty coffee elite” I mean the people who attend specialty coffee conferences, who are active in the various coffee-related competitions, and/or who own shops aimed at more discerning consumers. These are the people or companies who have thousands of followers on Twitter and Facebook and who write blog posts or make YouTube videos with hundreds or thousands of views. I use it to refer to those who are actively attempting to shape taste and consumption preferences, either in their own stores or across the industry more broadly.

Roaster's Guild. Winners of national and international competitions, writers for *Roast* or *Barista Magazine* or *Sprudge*, and buyers for high-profile shops such as Intelligentsia, Counter Culture, and Stumptown help produce and circulate knowledge about distinction: they are the intellectuals of the specialty industry. But because it is a small community, they also tend to reinforce certain ideas at the expense of others. Today the preference might be for high acidity, referred to as "juiciness." Next week, or next year, these preferences will likely have changed. This is not to argue that all cuppers and buyers agree with each other, as they certainly do not. Nonetheless, the need to demonstrate coffee intellectualism comes in the form of agreeing, at least to some extent, with other coffee intellectuals in order to show that one is qualified to be a member of the club.

At the same time, there has been in recent years a realization that to focus only on "coffee for the 1%," as Piper, the Austin entrepreneur, put it, is to miss out on a number of economic opportunities for themselves, their employees, and farmers. And these missed opportunities are not limited to the pursuit of economic gain: without fail every person I have spoken with on the consumption side of coffee production (that is, roasters, retailers, and baristas) talks about coffee as connection, a means to bring people together. Sometimes this connection is virtual and (unequally) imagined, as in the case of the farmer and the consumer. At other times, however, it is more concrete: again, Starbucks was and is imagined as a "third space," the place that is neither home nor work where people can meet to relax and socialize. Indeed, as Pendergrast (1999) details, coffeeshops gained traction as a space for intellectuals, where the French and U.S. American revolutions were planned – possible because unlike in taverns, patrons remained clearheaded and alert (Ellis 2005; Hattox 1985; Milton 2003). Specialty purveyors thus see themselves as providing a space for conversation, connection, and creative or intellectual thought, though in recent years a number of memes have circulated via social media playing on the role of coffeeshop as a workspace in which everyone is seated by themselves at a table with

headphones firmly implanted in their ears. Such spaces are characterized as the place where you go when you want to be alone with other people.<sup>68</sup>

While few would linger over a bitter, stale cup of coffee, shops that push too far towards the esoteric risk alienating a large portion of their potential customer base. The exception, of course, is when the knowledgeable consuming elite *is* your base, such as at Blue Bottle. Their sign does not even have their name on it: it is simply a drawing of a blue bottle, so patrons must be “in the know” to recognize it. The ability to first recognize the logo and secondly, to be able to speak knowledgeably about one’s preference for Kenyans over Guatemalans, or Chemex over V60, or for chocolate notes versus florals, is how one passes the test to belong in such spaces.

Indeed, many discussions at conferences revolve around the basic, yet fraught decisions regarding what to serve, how to serve it, and how much baristas should try to teach customers while preparing their drink. The challenge is to share knowledge and the ability to differentiate coffees with the “average” consumer, to teach others to notice the same nuances and types of differentiation that they find so important and rewarding, while accepting that not every customer wants to drink black drip coffee. This is complicated by the fact that within the past few years a plethora of alternatives to the large, commercial Bunn brewers have appeared (or reappeared) on the market: the Hario V60, the Chemex, the Melitta, the Aeropress and the French press, to name just a few, all offer subtly different tastes, but they all take upwards of five minutes to prepare and require well-trained baristas who can not only remember each method’s grind, timing, turbulence, water temperature, and the like, but who can also prepare the drinks consistently under pressure. The anxiety which circulates in the nexus of distinction and accessibility – or the need to stay outside this nexus, as in the case of Blue Bottle – is not simply a question of business models or meeting customer taste expectations, however. It has direct

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<sup>68</sup> To counter this isolationist tendency, boutique chain Blue Bottle refuses to provide either electrical outlets or wi-fi in its shops. Additionally, some of its stores do not stock to-go cups, requiring customers to sit and enjoy their coffee *in situ* – and to talk to other people, since the use of electronic devices is highly discouraged.

ramifications for the entire commodity chain. Beyond the high stakes for farmers, there is a push within the specialty industry higher barista pay and recognition of the job as a career, rather than a part-time fast-food type position. Starbucks made the news for announcing that it would help pay for college education for its baristas, while coffee news website Sprudge has been vocal in pushing for the barista-as-career shift and in denouncing advertisements or news pieces that refer to anyone as “just” a barista.

To its credit, specialty industry members are highly aware of the inequality between farmers and retailers, though they vary widely in their opinions about what should be done about it. In one 2014 blog post, Chad Trewick, an SCAA board member and risk consultant at FCStone (a Fortune 500 financial services company), writes that a “critical part” of specialty coffee’s evolving business model is to “increase consumer perception of the value of coffee to ensure customers support necessary changes in our value chain – i.e., potentially having to pay higher retail prices – by continuing to celebrate quality and building understanding of what it should cost” (Trewick 2014). According to Trewick – and he is hardly alone – increasing consumer understanding of quality is the most logical path forward to higher retail prices and thus, higher prices paid to farmers. The goal, then, is to de-couple the recognition of distinction from rarity and inaccessibility, to bring taste and discernment to the masses, with the hopes of making higher retail prices acceptable to a much wider audience. Because coffee has long been seen as a sludgy morning drink, palatable only with milk and sugar, this has been an upward battle, but one which has, I think, been aided by a resurgence in other craft and do-it-yourself industries in the United States: homebrewing beer is increasingly popular, as are craft breweries. There are new apparel lines that have bucked the outsourcing trend to produce limited runs of their clothes within the United States, and farmers markets and food cooperatives are popping up across the country.

Another area of craft production is cheese. In her recent ethnography of artisanal cheese production in the United States, anthropologist Heather Paxson refers to “taste education,” where “through an appropriately educated palate, consumers can demonstrate that they are worthy of

accruing for themselves the symbolic capital conveyed in a gourmet food” (Paxson 2013:192). This is part of the process of becoming a connoisseur, which “implies not only a recognition of distinctiveness but an intuitive judgment of qualities thought to be objective” (Ulin 1996:45). Certainly the same attempt to acquire or accrue symbolic capital is present within specialty coffee, but there is an important difference between U.S. consumption of coffee and of artisanal cheese: coffee is grown *elsewhere*, whereas the artisanal cheese producers who are the subjects of Paxson’s book are all living and working in U.S. communities, sometimes as a welcome change of pace from successful and lucrative office-based careers. The geographic determinism that requires that almost all of the country’s coffee comes from outside its borders (Hawai’i is the only exception, but its supply is quite limited), in countries that tend towards the bottom of the poverty spectrum, introduces a layer of complication into what is already a complicated determination of taste and quality. As I will discuss in later chapters, not only can poverty and Otherness not be decoupled from coffee’s quality, they form an important component in its narratives, wielded in different ways and for different purposes, but wielded nonetheless.

### **Storytelling and Distinction**

Beyond the Otherness of coffee producers, however, is another challenge for those who wish to bring differentiation and quality to the masses in order to raise retail prices: coffee’s ubiquity. As discussed in chapter three, by the mid twentieth century coffee had become such an important part of daily life in the United States that price increases (due to war and weather) were investigated by Congress on behalf of an outraged public. The big companies responded to rising prices not by passing the increases onto the consumer, but by downgrading quality in order to maintain a more even retail price. According to the 2013 National Coffee Association survey, 63% of U.S. adults drink a cup or more of coffee per day, and 83% drink it at least occasionally. Despite inroads by other caffeinated beverages, the United States consumes 4.2 kilograms of coffee per person per year (International Coffee



Organisation (ICO) 2011; Perez 2013). With levels of consumption this high, unlike wine or artisanal cheese, coffee is seen by many as a basic necessity, drunk by white and blue collar workers alike at all times of the day for its energizing (or at least, fatigue-concealing) properties. Though coffee industry members frequently compare themselves to wine, perhaps a better comparison might be beer, where there is a recognition that “beer” as a category can include everything from very light beers to lagers and porters and stouts, from India Pale Ales to sour beer. Yet while beer drinkers can and do state a preference for the kind of beer they like, the recognition of the variety possible in coffee is thus far limited. Therefore, in order to increase retail prices purveyors first must overcome the (often unconscious) idea that Folgers or Starbucks offers the only possible coffee experience, and then tell a carefully crafted narrative that mixes apparent objectivity (e.g., cupping scores) with concerns that range far outside the experience of drinking coffee (e.g., farmers, the environment, or activism more broadly).

Coffee purveyors must market this distinction without the long history of *terroir* that marks wine production and consumption (Ulin 1996), and without the clearer category distinctions of beer and cheese. I do not wish to argue that these distinctions in wine, cheese, and beer are without disagreement, or that the lines are sharply drawn between categories. Rather, consumption of these foods begins with the very notion that there *are* categories: red and white wine, or dark beer and light beer, or sharp cheese or mild. As with coffee, the ability to further refine these categories, and to demarcate finer and finer gradations between them, is part of the process of becoming a connoisseur. There are two complications with coffee, however. The first is that its ubiquity and the decades of a race to the bottom by the major companies has made it so that many consumers are unaware of the possibilities of difference, recognizing only categories of roast (dark or light) rather than intrinsic properties of the coffee itself (acidity, flavor). Coffee does not arrive in the store ready to drink: it must be prepared, whether by a barista or at home. The possibilities for preparation make for exciting

debates and experiences among connoisseurs, but they also further complicate distinction and the ability to recognize it.

This makes for a messy story, but it is seen as one that must be told. Specialty's surplus value is dependent on not only telling the right kind of story, but on being able to prove to consumers that this story can and does have real, tangible, positive effects at all levels of the commodity chain. It has to make things better for farmers (in terms of income), for the environment (e.g. in terms of loosely defined sustainability measures, or water contamination), and for consumers (in terms of an improved taste and/or social experience); this improvement is only possible, as Trewick and others note, if consumers are willing to pay more for what many consider a basic necessity. Merging these three very different ideas of "better" in one narrative for a drink that means many different things to different people and at different times is difficult at best, so it is perhaps not surprising that the industry has worked hard to quantify as many elements of this process as possible.

### ***Slurping Towards Specialty***

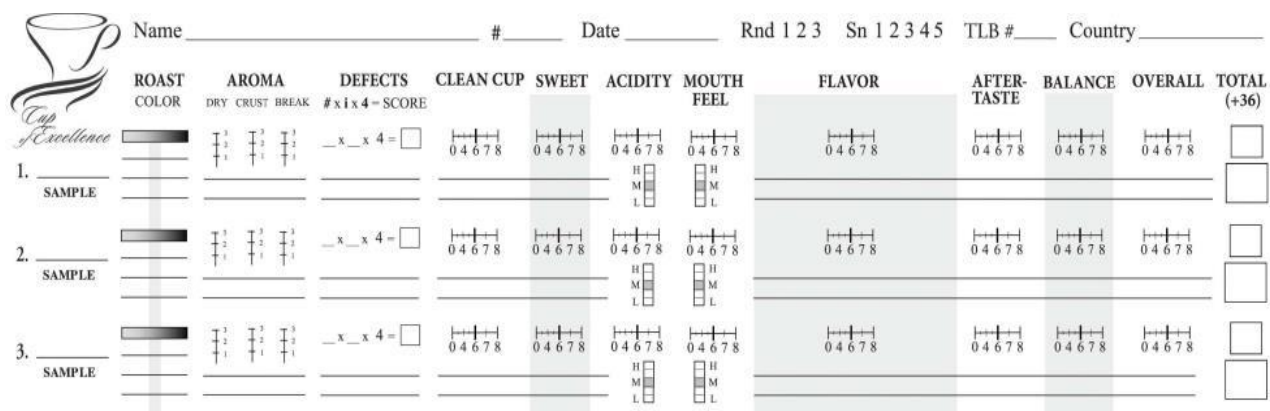
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The coffee cupping room is a quietly loud space. Cuppers are exhorted not to speak to each other, not to listen to music, in general, to make as little noise as possible so that everyone can concentrate on their work. At the same time, the sound of dozens of people slurping coffee, spitting it into a cup, rinsing out their spoons, and tapping them on the table to shake off water droplets can be deafening. It is a strange dance of coordination and awkwardness: coordination, because you must balance your cupping spoon, spit cup, clipboard, and writing instrument; and awkwardness, because it's very hard to be graceful while loudly slurping coffee into the back of your throat and then spitting it out into a cup or in some cases, a communal garbage can in the middle of the room.

The purpose of cupping is to attach a numerical value to the subjective question of a coffee's value. Different institutions use slightly different scoring systems, but each assigns an upper and lower range to the basic categories of aroma, acidity, mouthfeel, flavor, and aftertaste; the total is always out

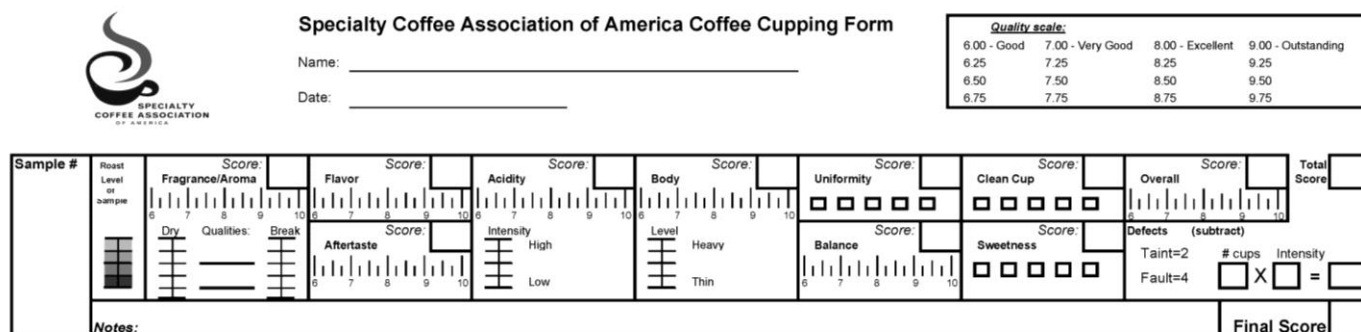
of 100 points, and coffee must earn a least a score of 80 or it is relegated to the conventional category – and conventional pricing. Those that score at least an 85 are very good coffees; above 90 is excellent, and rarely does a coffee score over 92. Each point between 80 and 92, therefore, has an outsized value, for it can make a substantial difference in the price a farmer receives. This price differential is, however, not guaranteed: the farmer must be able to connect with a buyer who a) recognizes and b) appreciates the difference in quality, and c) is willing to pay a higher price for it.

To understand how something as apparently subjective as taste and flavor could be assigned a



The form is titled "Cap Excellence" and includes fields for Name, #, Date, Rnd 1 2 3, Sn 1 2 3 4 5, TLB #, and Country. It features a grid for cupping three samples, with columns for Roast Color, Aroma (Dry, Crust, Break), Defects (# x 1 x 4 = SCORE), Clean Cup, Sweet, Acidity, Mouth Feel, Flavor, After-Taste, Balance, Overall, and Total (+36). Each row includes a sample number, a sample name, and a series of checkboxes and scales for each attribute.

Image 7: Alliance for Coffee Excellence Cupping Form  
First three of ten rows shown here.



The form is titled "Specialty Coffee Association of America Coffee Cupping Form" and includes fields for Name and Date. It features a grid for cupping one sample, with columns for Roast Level or Sample, Score, Fragrance/Aroma, Flavor, Acidity, Body, Uniformity, Clean Cup, Overall, and Total Score. Each row includes a sample number, a sample name, and a series of checkboxes and scales for each attribute. A "Quality scale" table is provided in the top right corner, and a "Notes" section is at the bottom.

Quality scale:			
6.00 - Good	7.00 - Very Good	8.00 - Excellent	9.00 - Outstanding
6.25	7.25	8.25	9.25
6.50	7.50	8.50	9.50
6.75	7.75	8.75	9.75

Image 8: SCAA Cupping Form  
First row only shown here; the form continues down the page. Used with permission of the SCAA.

consistent value, I spent a week in February 2014 at a Cup of Excellence training at the Honduran Coffee Institute (IHCAFE; *Instituto Hondureño del Café*) in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. The attendees hailed from Honduras, the U.S., Colombia, Thailand, Ukraine, and Hong Kong, and each had a well-developed palate and years of tasting experience. For a variety of reasons, the participants had come to learn more about the Cup of Excellence program, which is a competition, currently held in ten countries, to discover the best coffees that country has to offer. Those that score at least an 85 are offered up in an online auction, where bidders purchase samples, cup them on their own, and bid on their favorites. For buyers, the Cup of Excellence provides an opportunity to offer something new to their customers, while for farmers, even those who do not win the competition, it is a chance to connect with new markets, hopefully creating long-term sales partnerships, as well as to earn much higher prices than are possible on the open market.

Cupping takes place not only during competitions, but every time a roaster purchases coffee or roasts a new batch. Sherri, the trainer, described it as two separate kinds of cupping: cupping for an objective score, and profile cupping, or cupping to determine what blend or roast one's consumers will buy. Participants in the Cup of Excellence training were exhorted to set aside their own preferences or ideas about profile cupping and roasting in favor of an objective analysis: was this a quality coffee, or was it not? Was the cup "clean and sweet," or was it murky, dirty, underdeveloped or overprocessed? Were there defects present in the cup? What flavors were present, and did they work together in harmony, or was one overpowering to the coffee's detriment? Did the coffee have a high acidity (the attribute that makes coffee "sparkle," "pop," or be "vibrant") and a good mouthfeel (the general description for how coffee "fits" in the mouth)? These attributes, Sherri assured us, were not negotiable or subjective. A coffee has high acidity, or it does not. It is sweet, or it is not. It is balanced, or it is not. Coffees can have differing levels of sweetness or acidity but receive the same score depending on how well the other attributes "play together" in the mouth; the cupper's job is to recognize these attributes

and to score them appropriately. One is therefore simultaneously measuring the coffee against every other coffee and flavor the cupper has ever tasted, and considering it solely on its own merits.

In contrast, profile cupping or profile roasting is what one does with one's customers in mind. Sherri noted that different regions of the world have different taste preferences, and that consumers in Germany would likely choose differently than those in Japan or Australia or the United States when it came to their coffee. Within those categories, different markets also have different preferences for roast or blend, and it was up to the shop owner to determine what kind of profile their customers would accept.<sup>69</sup> Essentially, profile cupping has a goal in mind: to be pleasing to the palate of a shop's consumers in order to sell more coffee. Objective cupping, on the other hand, has no such goal: the only purpose is to determine the qualities present (or not) in the cup. Whether cuppers, particularly those who are roasters and therefore used to profile cupping, can truly set aside their preferences is another question, but then, that is why the Cup of Excellence judges are drawn from across the world.

Cupping, particularly for a Cup of Excellence competition, involves following a number of highly circumscribed processes in order to minimize the intrusion of possibly subjective factors. Cuppers are asked to not eat spicy foods for at least a day prior to cupping, burn their tongue, or wear perfume. Each coffee is roasted to a specific, "cupping" profile. The grounds are weighed multiple times to ensure that each cup has the same amount of coffee. The water is heated to 205 degrees Fahrenheit and then poured carefully and at an even speed into the cup; this ensures that nothing splashes out and no air pockets form around the grounds, the presence of which affect the flavor. The careful attention paid to details such as precise measurements and temperatures is an attempt to make the only difference

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<sup>69</sup> I found this to be true when opening up my own coffeeshop. We requested samples from a number of roasters and then sent them to friends and family in numbered plastic bags. Recipients prepared their samples as they normally would and sent us back their comments on each one. There was a noticeable split in the results. Those who told us that they were frequent Starbucks customers strongly preferred two of the samples, while those who did not usually drink Starbucks strongly preferred another. Presumably, the Starbucks customers liked the darker roasts the company offered, and were looking for a similar profile. In the end, we chose the roaster preferred by the non-Starbucks customers (and by myself), wanting to differentiate our coffee from that of Starbucks.

between the coffees be the intrinsic qualities of the coffee itself, rather than a variation in extraction or quantity. Once they have been set out on the table, the grounds are sniffed three times: once after swirling while dry, once immediately after the water pour, and once precisely four minutes later, when they are “broken” by drawing the cupping spoon through the surface and then lifting it towards the nose. After four minutes, the coffee starts to overextract, diminishing the flavor and increasing its bitterness.<sup>70</sup> After this final sniff, the top of the cup is skimmed until no bubbles remain; once it has sufficiently cooled, eight to twelve minutes into the process, the slurping and spitting and note-taking begins.

During our training Sherri ran (quietly) around the room, checking the grounds and pour and even the way in which we tapped our spoons onto napkins to remove water droplets. Cuppers are expected to move through each coffee three times, to determine whether any defects or subtle flavor profiles appear as it cools. A bad coffee, Sherri explained, can hide under heat, but only the best can stand up to the cold: as one roaster later told me, “cold coffee never lies.” Two cups of each coffee are set on each side of the table, so that there are four total cups of the same batch; these batches are cupped anonymously so that prior knowledge of the farm or process does not enter into the calculations. Cuppers move down one side, tasting each of the two cups of the same coffee and taking notes on their clipboards, then down the other side of the table, and finally return to the first row and cup again. This means that the each cupper tastes one side twice and the other side once; their partner on the other side does the same thing for the opposite coffees. On the first pass, we were instructed to pay attention only to the sweetness and cleanliness of the cup; the second pass was for more detailed notes on flavor and acidity, as well as initial scoring. The third pass was to confirm or deny previous notes and points; individual coffees could be re-tasted as necessary if the cupper found him or herself in

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<sup>70</sup> Much of the coffee prepared at home or in locations such as diners is overextracted; the bitterness many complain of in coffee is not an inherent attribute, but one obtained through age, improper measuring, grind, water temperature, not cleaning the machinery, or some combination thereof. Conventional coffee, such as Folgers, is not inherently bitter.

sudden disagreement with prior assessments. As the coffee cools, the “truth” is revealed, with faults that had hidden under the heat coming to the fore.

There are four cups of the same coffee because on occasion defects can be present in one cup and not another; when a defect is found, the coffee is removed from competition or, in the case of profile cupping, the seller is usually contacted and a refund requested. Defects can range in severity, but the worst include phenol and potato, two distinct tastes that, unlike other defects, are impossible to detect prior to cupping. I asked the technicians at the Honduran Coffee Institute whether these defects occurred prior to harvest, were the result of harvesting unripe or overripe cherries, or were created during processing. I was met with shrugs. “No one knows,” they said, though several studies were underway to attempt to pinpoint the causes of phenol, which leaves a chemical, highly astringent aftertaste in the mouth for several minutes.<sup>71</sup> A single bean containing phenol can contaminate the entirety of the batch with which it is roasted, and if phenol is present in one bean, it is likely present in others, though the distribution varies sharply and widely. Finding phenol is cause for cuppers to disqualify the coffee from competition and for roasters to throw out the entire batch and to request a refund from their supplier; finding its root cause and ways to detect it prior to cupping would, therefore, be significant for farmers and roasters alike.

After all of this slurping and spitting and marking, cuppers total their scores, subtracting points for defects. In training and during competitions, cuppers must become “calibrated,” both to themselves and to each other. This essentially means that one must consistently give the same coffee the same score, achieved by cupping the same coffees several times over the course of a day. Truly calibrated cuppers will, in the absence of one-time defects, always give the coffee the same score, regardless of their own flavor preferences. While cuppers are not expected to all give the same score for the same coffee, they should be relatively clustered together – a coffee that earned a score of 79 from one cupper

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<sup>71</sup> Though in my case, I found the phenol taste so overwhelming that it affected my ability to cup for the next hour.

and a 91 from another would be, in Sherri's terms, "not well understood." Again, the trope of coffee-as-story came into play: cuppers, Sherri told us, had to learn to "listen to what the coffee is trying to tell you." You had to be "fair to the coffee," to not judge it against the other coffees on the table or against whether you thought your customers would buy it. Again, it is not about likeability or taste preference, but about the coffee's inherent quality. I found it difficult to separate the two, but my classmates appeared able to change their thinking, both in the ways they discussed cupping and in the scores they gave coffees they had previously "misunderstood" or not preferred.

The anonymity of competition scoring, and the fact that judges are brought in from around the world specifically to mitigate regional flavor preferences and familiarity, convinced me that groupthink was not a factor at the competition stage. Where groupthink *does* occur, however, is at the level of training, where certain attributes are prized and coffees that do not demonstrate them are scored down. By the time they are considered qualified to judge the Cup of Excellence, cuppers have spent years being steeped in these ideas about acidity, balance, and mouthfeel, and have made active tasting a part of their lives.<sup>72</sup>

The question is not whether these attributes exist but whether their presence or absence makes for an empirically higher quality coffee – and what that means for the farmers producing it. This is a foregone conclusion for almost all of the retailers, roasters, and graders with whom I have spoken: a coffee with higher acidity, sweetness, and a cleaner cup is indeed a better coffee, and it should be recognized as such. Certainly Lorenzo Perkins' cupping experience speaks to the argument that there is a quantifiable difference in quality and "betterness" between specialty and conventional coffees. For farmers, producing a higher quality coffee is recognized by receiving a higher price – at least in theory. As the case of Costa Rica will demonstrate, this quality is not always recognized in the final sale price,

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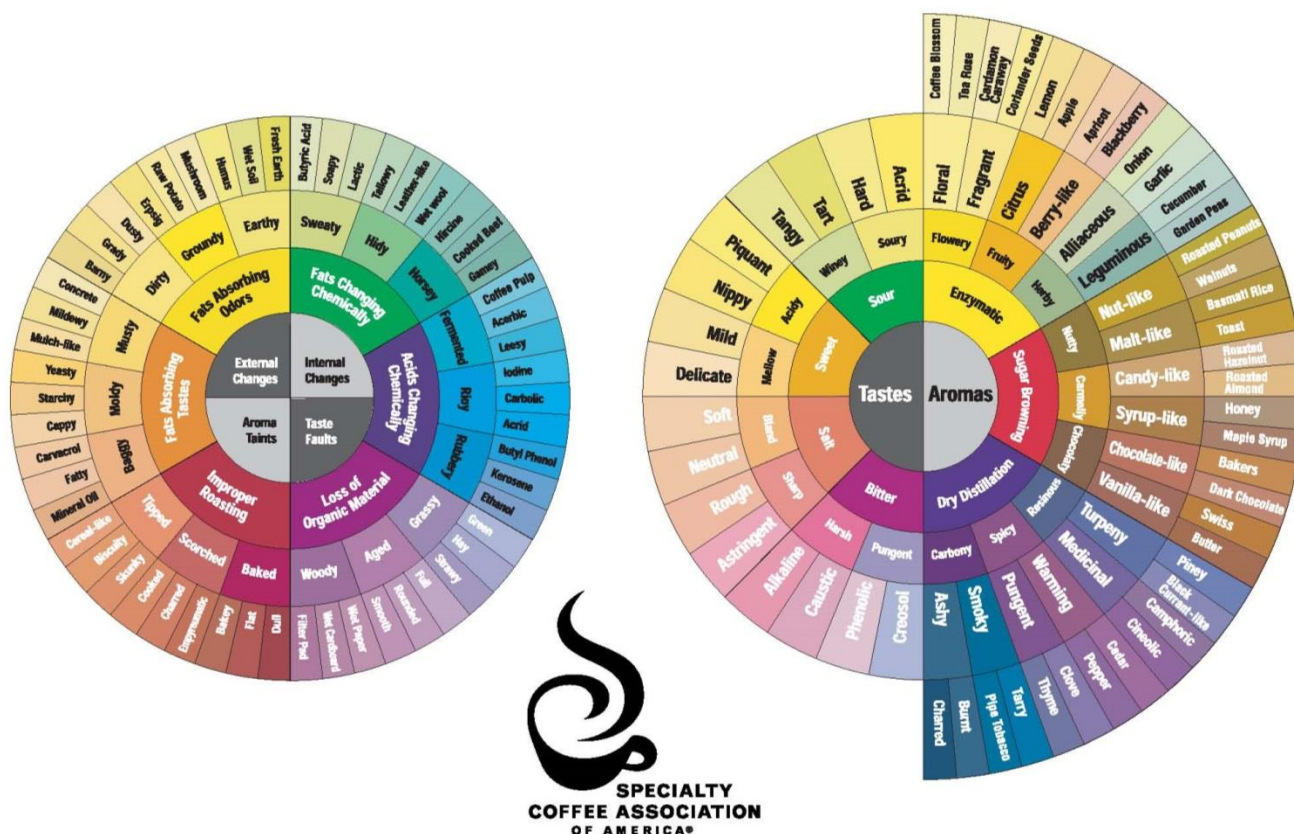
<sup>72</sup> Or as Sherri said, "The only way to know what hay tastes like is to taste hay. You have to try everything, but you have to try it consciously, so you can remember it for later."



nor is it always economically worthwhile for farmers to improve their coffee quality to the levels that specialty now demands.

Naturals have become desirable in the past few years; during Paige West's fieldwork in Papua New Guinea in the late 2000s, farmers were unable to earn a high price for their coffee, in large part because of the natural process their isolation practically required (West 2012). Acidity preferences, too, have changed over time. Mark of Kaladi Coffee told me that when he was first training in coffee in the 1980s, the only kind of "good" acidity was citric. Malic acid, which tastes more like apples, was then seen as a fault, allegedly due to improper respiration of the coffee tree because of lack of shade cover.

## COFFEE TASTER'S FLAVOR WHEEL



330 GOLDEN SHORE, SUITE 50 • LONG BEACH, CA 90802 • TEL 562.624.4100 • FAX 562.624.4101 • WWW.SCAA.ORG

Image 9: Coffee Taster's Flavor Wheel

The wheel is also available in Spanish, Portuguese, and French, and is available in a number of formats, including on posters that are popular in cupping rooms. Used with permission of the Specialty Coffee Association of America.

Mark refuses to buy coffee that has malic acid, in part because he does not want this flavoring in his coffee, and in part because he sees full-sun production as antithetical to the specialty enterprise. He is not alone in combining sensory characteristics with environmental and/or social justice concerns, the practice of which will be discussed in later sections. Despite expressed concerns about social justice and environmental sustainability, nonetheless the prevailing idea across much of the industry today is that malic acid is equated with “juiciness,” the same descriptor used for natural processed coffees. Where once it would have been seen as a fatal flaw, rendering the coffee fit only for below-specialty-grade consumption, today this acidity is praised and sought after in competition and in production roasting.

To further complicate the situation, quality may not always refer to taste quality. Instead, industry members, particularly at the lower end of specialty, use it to refer to the coffee’s grade, which is in turn based on the number of defects and the size and uniformity of the beans (Overly 2014a). The larger, more dense the beans, and the fewer the defects, the higher the grade and thus the higher the quality. Defects could include moldy, diseased, blackened, sour, fermented beans, or sticks and rocks. Each grade allows for a certain percentage of defects within a given size lot, which is supposed to consist only of beans of a similar size. Bean size is determined by shaking them through a sizer, essentially boards with increasingly larger holes in them. This can be done manually or with machinery. When the defect percentage is high and/or the beans are not uniform, it is for the most part the result of inadequate sorting at the mill, though some defects, such as phenol and potato, are not detectable until the beans have been roasted and cupped.

The search for these problems is known as defect or trade cupping. It is essentially “gatekeeper cupping” in which coffee is cupped at origin prior to leaving the country to ensure that no major defects are present. It is a pass/no pass system rather than one which determines quality or flavor profile, and is intended to protect buyers, sellers, and national coffee institutes from selling or exporting products that are below export grade. Of course, mills can only sort what the farmers bring them, and if farmers bring

in beans that have been badly harvested (left too long on the branch, or picked too early), or if their harvesters are too careless in the picking (letting too many sticks, leaves, and rocks fall into their baskets), then mills will face a more difficult challenge in sorting the coffee correctly, or will need to divert more of it towards lower grades and thus, lower prices than they had anticipated.

Determining what “quality” is, then, is a highly variable process, but one with tremendous repercussions for farmers and the prices they receive for their crop. The mixture of objective (bean size, defects) qualities with subjective (e.g. taste, balance) components makes it especially difficult to explain to both farmers and consumers what is different about a given coffee, as well as why that difference should be considered superior or inferior. It is for this reason that the industry relies so heavily on storytelling and narrative to create and maintain difference, and why, as I will argue in the next two chapters, farmers must properly perform the techniques of farming in order to be rewarded for their efforts. In this next section, I look at how ideas about good coffee has shifted over time, and how these ideas are connected to modes of production, environmental management, and quantifying the qualitative.

### ***The Green Revolution and Managing Quality***

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As discussed in the first and third chapters, until about the 1960s coffee was “good” if it arrived at its final destination without having been stolen or damaged in transit. While the creation of the specialty industry as an industry in the mid-1970s certainly went a long way towards changing this definition, shifts in coffee production were not simply a response to industry demands. Ideas about how to grow “good” coffee were tied to geopolitics and U.S. fears about a domino effect in Central America, namely that if one country were to “fall” to the Soviets, the rest would follow. Outside Costa Rica, the authoritarian states of the isthmus joined the U.S. in seeing citizen-led land reform as an incitement to revolution, and state rulers believed that they were the only parties or institutions capable of initiating any kind of change. Moreover, continuing the legacy of colonialism, leaders saw themselves as needing

to force these changes upon the uneducated and unwilling masses for their own good (Bakewell 2004; Bushnell, et al. 1991; Halperín Donghi 1993; Holden 2004; MacLeod 1973). Outside Costa Rica state responses to demands for agricultural reform increasingly took the form of military repression, particularly during the Cold War, when the United States allied itself with rulers who could control any movement that even hinted at Communism.

Following the Cuban Revolution in 1959, however, the United States was particularly concerned about political stability in Central America, where economic diversification and continual growth were seen as the solutions to inequality and unhappy populations (Williams 1986:4). A reliance on export agriculture as the primary economic driver had led only to increasing inequality in Central America, though this was less true in more egalitarian Costa Rica. Fearful of another Communist revolution in which U.S. interests and investments would be threatened if not appropriated, President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress launched the Central American Common Market (CACM) in 1961. The CACM was supposed to provide for an equitable distribution of benefits among the five Central American countries despite their differences in industrialization, and to decrease volatility due to over-reliance on a few cash crops, such as coffee and bananas, sold in the international market, increasing the size of local markets and allowing for regional specializations (Williams 1986:3-5). Yet the dramatic increase in inflation in the 1970s, partially brought on by the international oil crisis, meant that CACM countries once again relied on traditional agricultural exports and saw increasing inequality between elite landowners and an increasing population of landless workers, as they sold or were forced off their land to pay debts (Bulmer-Thomas 1987; Edelman 1999).

In order to increase the impact of traditional agriculture while maintaining the desired political stability, the 1970s saw an increase in international development projects in Central America focusing on coffee production. The solution to what the U.S. and lending organizations such as the IMF and World Bank saw as chronic underdevelopment was to introduce science and technology to an industry

whose production had been almost entirely traditional by necessity, using organic methods as part of what were seen by outsiders as idiosyncratic practices that had been passed down from parent to child, people who were in ignorance of how to maximize profits. To achieve higher yields and thus greater income, and to achieve some kind of predictability and stability among Latin America's poor coffee farmers, programs such as USAID introduced technified coffee at the tail end of the Green Revolution.

The coffee grown as part of the Green Revolution was not specialty, but destined for conventional markets. Coincidentally or as a response to changes in taste, specialty appeared on the scene as the International Coffee Agreement fell apart and the Soviet Union ceased to be a threat to U.S. interests. Although hardly anti-capitalist, ideas about what constitutes good coffee – and good farmers – have shifted once again, at least in areas that maintained small farmers, are able to support arabica production, and have access to the specialty market. As with full-sun production, these ideas are hardly limited just to the biological composition of the coffee itself. Instead, I argue that they are shot through with a wide-ranging set of assumptions and preferences that go far beyond cupping score – which is itself the product of social negotiation.

### **Technification as Modernity**

Technified, or full-sun, coffee was seen as the epitome of clean, manageable, predictable production. At the time, most coffee in Latin America was grown under shade as part of larger ecosystems; while not wild, coffee was generally intercropped wherever it would fit in a farmer's field, making for labor-intensive maintenance and harvesting. Perfecto et al. (1996:605) note that the "diverse plant community within a traditional farm fits much better into the risk-averse mentality of many small farmers;" these traditional agroecosystems generally provide avocados, bananas, tangerines, honey, and timber as a source of income or sustenance, critical for families often living on the edge of subsistence. But under USAID-style programs, the importance of such crops either went unrecognized or was considered secondary to the increased earning potential of coffee; instead of intercropping with diverse

species, shade canopies were removed and disease-resistant strains of coffee plants were introduced in many regions. Where the topography allowed, coffee was planted in rows, like corn in the U.S. Midwest, so that it could be more easily harvested with machinery. To eliminate variation and improve predictability, pruning and picking were standardized across any farm that received aid. Rather than hand-picking berries when they were ripe, which often meant four or five passes through a farm, whenever possible machinery passed through the plants one time only and picked all berries, regardless of shape, size, or ripeness (Perfecto et al. 1996:599). In smaller fields mechanical “fingers” were introduced that could perform the same action as a human hand, but much more quickly, and since quality was not the goal, it did not matter that sticks, leaves, and bugs also fell into baskets along with coffee cherries at varying stages of ripeness. In the short term, technification did lead to higher yields and denser crops, as farmers could plant 3,000 – 7,000 plants in 2 ½ acres versus only 1,000 – 2,000 using traditional methods. These more densely spaced plants produced 4,000 – 4,500 pounds of cherry coffee, as compared with 1,000 – 1,300 pounds for those grown under traditional methods. By this measure, technification was a success.

There were, however, a number of drawbacks and downsides to this highly intensive, chemical-input-dependent approach. For one, these modern, scientifically selected plants lasted only twelve to fifteen years, as compared with the twenty-four to thirty or more expected of traditional plants, meaning that farmers would have to invest more in renovation and replacement than they would without technification. There is a prevailing idea within specialty coffee that old trees are undesirable trees, and it is reasonable to imagine that this idea has its roots in the Green Revolution. Every farmer, every roaster, every importer I have ever asked about it has told me that as coffee ages its yields and quality decline. Moreover, while these technified plantings were often ready to harvest approximately a year earlier than traditional shrubs, coffee planted under the new methods was more frail, with much of the crop dying within a year after being planted (Perfecto, et al. 1996; Pimentel, et al. 1992).

For another, all the interventions under the Green Revolution were aimed at increasing yields, a result that often came at the cost of soil, worker, and tree health. Maintaining yields that were so much higher than “traditional” methods required large amounts of chemical inputs, including fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. These inputs are expensive, and the wildly fluctuating nature of coffee prices meant that many farmers were working on very small margins (Nestel 1995:170-172; Pendergrast 1999:399-104; Perfecto, et al. 1996:599; Rice 1999:568; Rice and Ward 1996:9). Additionally, since polycultural coffee production plays an important role in agrobiodiversity, the switch to monocultural production has led to “biological deserts” (Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC) 2003:3), with increased erosion, polluted runoff, reduced wildlife habitat, and increased exposure of workers to hazardous chemicals. Nonetheless, the health risks for humans, fauna, and environments associated with technification were considered an unfortunate but necessary part of the path to modernization and political and economic stability (Pimentel, et al. 1992; Rice and Ward 1996).

Finally, while technified coffee was supposed to lead to uniform results under uniform conditions, coffee plantations are anything but uniform. The “proper” levels of fertilizer, pruning, or tree separation might work well on the test farms where the protocols were developed, but were unlikely to produce the same results everywhere. Even if the protocols appeared to work – that is, produced higher yields – it is impossible to know whether the protocols should be credited. While a number of scientists are working on different aspects of coffee – sequencing its genome, or the genome of leaf rust, analyzing caffeine content and its effects on the body, or trying to determine what is happening during roasting – very few are working to connect plant biology with cupping quality. Dr. Shawn Steiman, a tropical biologist and coffee consultant based in Hawai’i, is one of those few. His work attempts to understand the ways in which inputs (chemical or otherwise) affect coffee yield, quality, and cup score. Given the number of variables at play with any intervention, it is difficult to know what the actual cause of improvement or decline may be. Was it the mineral mix in the fertilizer, or was it especially rainy that

season, or did something else happen? It is extremely difficult to know with certainty what causes a given outcome, but he is attempting to pin down some of these variables.

As Mark Overly told me, “Everything in this business is anecdotal.” That is, both Mark and Shawn clarified in further discussion that often single examples become magnified and taken as universal truths for all farmers and all mills, without a more detailed analysis of why X event occurred and whether it was actually due to Y intervention. So a singularity, or a case of correlation rather than causation, is passed around between roasters and buyers, and reinscribed as certain knowledge rather than the experiences of a few people in a few places. This may be why farmers in Costa Rica so frequently expressed to me their frustration with the interventions prescribed by their buyers: what worked in Guatemala, or even elsewhere in Costa Rica, was in no way guaranteed to work on their fields. They had years and in some cases decades of working on their farms, but their knowledge was frequently ignored or dismissed. Yet even if the technification programs worked exactly as predicted, Steiman told me, those who faithfully followed prescriptions for production would have in fact strained their trees, giving up more consistent, long-term production capability in exchange for higher yields of shorter durations, and needing to invest more and more each year in chemicals and shrub renovation.

It should not be surprising that even under the guise of fomenting political stability by reducing inequality in Latin America, not all farms were able or willing to technify. Only those who first, owned their own land and secondly, had the manpower, funding, and expertise to access funding and pesticide programs could do so, leaving innumerable farmers and landless workers out of the picture altogether. Additionally, those who fully mechanized had to have the right geographical contours and the capital to invest in harvesting machinery that required yearly upkeep. Costa Rica was well-placed to undergo this scientific revolution, as much of the Central Valley then under production was flat or gently sloping, and its farmers were generally better-off than their smallholding counterparts elsewhere, and thus able to access such programs. By 1986, roughly 21% of the country’s original forest remained, a figure that



improved to about 56% by 2005 (Cooper 2012).<sup>73</sup> The country's rate of deforestation during this time, though not entirely due to technification, certainly speaks to the success of the idea that chopping down trees was the only way to become fully modern. That the rate of forestation has increased since the Green Revolution demonstrates that ideas about modernity and technification have once again shifted.

Indeed, despite the existence of many small, rural farms and sometimes overwhelming poverty, almost half the production in Latin America had been technified by 1990 (Nestel 1995:170-172; Pendergrast 1999:399-401; Perfecto, et al. 1996:599; Rice 1999:568; Rice and Ward 1996:9). The result was that farms that had been refuges for biodiversity, grown according to each farmer's understanding of the relationship between land, plant, and inputs, were transformed into much more uniform, scientifically managed spaces that required cash to run, usually in the form of purchasing the fertilizers that made increased yields possible. Regardless of whether Orosi farmers participated in these particular programs, as I argue in later chapters they felt and continue to feel the effects of scientific and ideological management of what was once an individual practice, and that many of them cite it, directly or indirectly, as a reason for leaving coffee altogether.

Put another way, scientifically modernized coffee was supposed to produce equally modern people who made decisions based on economic rationality and efficiency. At the time the language of technification was not explicitly tied to cup quality, but rather to yields, with the idea being that farmers who modernized would be able to compete on quantity at a time when quality was still a tiny niche market. Again, one of the broader goals of the Green Revolution, and the technification programs that were a part of it, was to decrease the chances of revolution or rebellion in poor agricultural regions in Latin America so that they would not be tempted to ally with the Soviet Union. Thus implicit in these

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<sup>73</sup> In Orosi, none of the farmers with whom I spoke mentioned technification programs, though they certainly talked about using fertilizers, and even with the sharp decline in the number of farmers there are still several shops that sell fertilizers and pesticides specifically blended for coffee. Nonetheless, the steep slopes of the hillsides, and the small size of many farms, leads me to believe that few of them fully participated in such programs, if at all.

one-size-fits-all measures of predictability and management was the idea that farmers would also become good economic citizens, reaping the benefits of capitalism and the free market. The need to constantly buy chemical inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides tied farmers ever more tightly to international markets and cash economies: rather than using organic fertilizer made from coffee cherries, or from recycling plants and organic matter from around the farm, farmers now had to purchase fertilizers made from fossil fuels and, as we will see with the case of Costa Rica, pay laborers to work and harvest rather than relying on kinship obligations. At the same time, somewhat ironically, the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) maintained a steady and predictable price that lessened some of the challenges of this transition. Unlike most other producing countries, in Costa Rica this predictability was further strengthened by ICAFE and by state welfare projects more generally.

To demonstrate how the increasing economic and social-activist importance of specialty has led to a shift away from full-sun coffee, I look briefly at the Smithsonian's shade-grown certification label. Its aims are in part economic, because specialty purveyors equate shade-grown coffee with improved quality of life for both farmers and the environment. They are also social-activist, for as with other labels, this one is intended to demonstrate this quality to conscious and conscientious consumers. It is, like Fair Trade, a way for alienated but concerned consumers to vote with their dollars; indeed, many roasters, such as Caffé Ibis in Utah, who supplied our store, offer "triple-certified" coffees that are organic, Fair Trade, and bird-friendly and shade-grown. As I discuss in a later section, the science on a direct correlation between shade and cup quality is at best inconclusive, but shade plantations are still lauded as epitomizing small-scale, farmer-friendly production and producing the best coffee.

### **Bird Friendly, Human Friendly?**

Again, as focused as they sometimes seem on quality, specialty purveyors do not only consider the impact on cupping score when it comes to supporting particular initiatives in farming regions: in fact, for some, such as Denver's Kaladi Coffee, the lives of producers are just as important as the coffee they

grow. I want to look briefly at the Smithsonian label, as the producers, importers, roasters, and cuppers with whom I have spoken have universally told me that shade is required to produce great coffee. This perspective may be a holdover from the early political days of specialty coffee, when Paul Katzeff was decrying U.S. involvement in the Contra war in Nicaragua and in the Salvadoran civil war: shade was anti-Green Revolution and therefore, anti-U.S. imperialism. Or it may be that shade is preferable because of its environmental effects, both for people and for landscapes. Perhaps shade-grown coffee truly does taste better than full-sun. For many purveyors, I suspect, the preference is a mixture of all three concerns, though newer purveyors and those who are less politically active are less likely to be aware of any connections between shade and imperialism.

The Smithsonian designation includes the following criteria and goals as part of their certification process: guarantee environmental sustainability; protect structural and species biodiversity; take into consideration the integration of coffee into existing agroforestry systems; the forest used for coffee production must not be part of a park or preserve; production techniques must not harm ecosystems and must contribute to sustainability and conservation of resources; permit cultural practices that involve use of epiphytes such as mosses, lichens, bromeliads, and orchids; and document environmental management (Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC) 2002). Yet the shift away from full-sun coffee is not limited to those who are officially certified bird-friendly. Farmers have their own ideas about the proper mix of sun and shade on their farms, as do buyers; as we will see in the next chapter, their spaces of disagreement are quite complex and are far from limited to wanting 10 trees in a given area instead of 12. This is because shade, whether it impacts cup quality or not, has a wide range of ramifications for farmers, harvesters, and the local environment. At its best, bird-friendliness also leads to increased biodiversity, erosion control, a wider range of cash or subsistence crops available for farmers, more nutrient-rich soil, and cooler conditions for harvesters, as they are somewhat protected by the shade rather than working only in the tropical sun (Greenberg, et al. 1997; Rice and Ward 1996).

There are a few possible downsides to increased shade. Farmers like Jorge and Esteban would often stop in the middle of a walk through someone else's coffee fields to tell me that they were using too much shade: that particular slope, they would say, did not receive much direct sun, so it didn't need a lot of shade to protect the plants. When plants were too shaded, they would not reach their full potential in terms of yield or flavor, and then space that could have been dedicated to more coffee was instead wasted on trees that were not needed. Moreover, Jorge told me that over-shaded plants were susceptible to mold, particularly in the southern part of the Oroqui Valley, which receives close to 7 meters of rainfall annually. And the shade trees can bring their own problems: though I could never confirm this with the farm's owners, one larger plantation on the northern side of the Valley poisoned the *poró* trees that had provided shade because they were said to be carrying a disease harmful to the coffee.<sup>74</sup> Once the plantation poisoned its trees, farms across the Valley did the same, so that where once there had been bright orange-yellow leaves dotting the green landscape of the coffee fields, now there are only brown shells of trees.

Whether specialty purveyors support shade-grown coffee out of appreciation for the wide range of marketing opportunities thus offered, because they truly care for farmers, and/or because they believe that shade-grown tastes better, the result is that many farms have been converted back to at least partial shade, which requires very different management from the farmer. For large farms, full-sun coffee can be managed scientifically: soil samples provide mineral concentrations that then determine how much and what kind of fertilizer to apply. Smaller farms have to rely on their instincts or experience to tell them what to use. Manuel, who is a full-time coffee farmer in the Tarrazú region, spent several hours discussing fertilizer concentrations with me, explaining that one part of his field received so much

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<sup>74</sup> I also could not determine why the trees were poisoned, instead of being cut down. The plantation runs along the road into Oroqui, and as the trees died some fell into the road, once landing on a car. Eventually someone cut down the dead trees that could reach the roadway, though those deeper into the fields remained standing. When I asked Jorge if the owners were afraid of damaging their coffee when the dead trees fell on the bushes, he simply shrugged. "They don't know what they're doing," he said. "They're Salvadoran. It isn't in their blood like it is in ours."

potassium, while another needed less. He always tried, he said, to minimize how much chemical fertilizer he used: he was able to use very little because as a full-time farmer, he was always out walking in his fields, noticing which plants were doing well and which needed a little help. After a lifetime of farming – he was 41 when we spoke – he knew what form that help should take, whether it was calcium or magnesium or maybe banana leaves or fruit peels. I want to quickly note here that Manuel's limited use of chemicals was possible only because of his full-time commitment to the fields: in Orosi, where coffee has become a part-time endeavor, farmers do not have the time or the deep-seated knowledge of each plant that they once had. Rather than moving organic materials around their farms to get the best results, they tended towards purchasing the recommended chemical mix at the small agricultural supply store in town.

### **Management After the Revolution**

The return to, or continuation of, non-technified growing techniques does not mean that specialty producers have ignored scientific innovation, merely that they have refocused their efforts towards a bevy of other interventions and measurements. National coffee organizations in producing countries offer workshops, courses, and manuals to farmers on topics from organic fertilizers to dealing with coffee pests and plagues (ICAFE 1992; International Coffee Organisation (ICO) 2013; Peters 2010). The workshops I observed in Costa Rica were well-attended and farmers not only were able to ask questions, they were fed lunch and walked away with handouts and web links for more information. During one such lunch, the farmers I sat with told me that while they did not always agree with ICAFE (Costa Rica Coffee Institute) or with CATIE, the tropical agricultural research institute who was co-hosting the event, they appreciated the opportunity to talk with other farmers, to share their concerns, and to listen to the pros and cons of various methods. Those who were able to attend this particular day-long workshop were very concerned about maintaining consistently high quality coffee, even if they

felt there was more that ICAFE should be doing to help them (the exact nature of such help was left unspecified) and even when buyers did not fully recognize their efforts with higher prices.

In Costa Rica ICAFE spends much of its energy and resources on maintaining consistency across the varied climates in the country, and although I was not always allowed to copy the records, the statistical and anecdotal data it has collected and disseminated to its farmers is impressive. This data includes measurements of every kind: ambient temperatures, soil temperatures, number of plants per hectare, when and how fertilizer was applied, whether shade trees exist and how densely they cover the plot, and so on, stretching back over the sixty years of the Institute's history. ICAFE additionally collects data on farmer income levels, gender, age, and microclimate location of their plots, all of which is readily available to the public on their website and in printed form within a few years of each census. ICAFE works with farmers, too, to test new hybrids: the farmer provides the field and maintains the crop, but usually earns some percentage of the sale price of seedlings or of the cherry coffee produced. These results are, again, disseminated to interested farmers. This is not to say that ICAFE is not without its detractors, or that all its interventions are perfect and to the benefit of the small family farmer. What I do want to note is that these practices, and their relative accessibility (ICAFE maintains a library in addition to its online resources) speak to the degree to which coffee data has been quantified and assembled. While the physical location of one's field may not be alterable, everything from soil composition to shade cover can be changed, although problematically, the results of these interventions will not be known until the harvest and more specifically, until the roasted coffee is cupped, sometimes more than five years after the fact. The prolonged delay from seed to cup makes scientific research challenging, particularly when the very concept of "quality" is up for debate. In this next section, I survey the current state of scientific research into interventions and cup quality, noting that very little of what is claimed to be quantified and known actually has been proven, and that many producers and purveyors are unaware of this information.

## *Quantifying Quality*

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Though objective measurements still would not answer the question of what makes coffee “better,” it would alleviate much of the uncertainty and experimentation that now surrounds coffee production, removing some of the unpredictability for farmers and leveling the playing field that now separates them from buyers. That is, when there is no consensus on what the effects are of a particular intervention, it is farmers who are exhorted to make changes to their growing methods, or millers who must change the way they process coffee, and these changes can vary from year to year and buyer to buyer. As I will demonstrate in the next two chapters, farmers in particular are called upon to perform care, to demonstrate that they have put forth every effort in producing the best possible crop so that purveyors can then tell that story to their customers – and to each other. The lack of consensus or even research about the impact of interventions on cup quality has led to a hodgepodge of ideas about what to do and when and why, and it falls disproportionately on farmers to respond to rapidly changing trends in the Global North. As anecdotal data passes through the industry, buyers anxious to be part of the next great thing, or to create the next big thing, pass their anxieties and dreams off to farmers. If this were an equal partnership, in which both sides worked together, it would be less of concern than the fact that these exchanges are almost inevitably inequitable due to the long histories of colonialism, imperialism, structural violence, and poverty that separates most farmers from most purveyors.<sup>75</sup>

In addition, one of the many difficulties in quantifying and qualifying quality is the tremendous range of spaces in which changes can occur that affect the final taste. From seed to cup, each phase offers new risks and results in a different profile; a Sumatran coffee that is wet processed will taste very different from one that is dry milled. It is perhaps the sheer number of physical transformations and possibilities for damage or injury that has caused specialty to focus so intently on farmers and farming conditions. In this section I draw heavily on the work of Shawn Steiman, the tropical plant scientist

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<sup>75</sup> This is not to say that such partnerships are impossible; they do exist, particularly between boutique buyers such as Tim Wendelboe and the farmers who supply his coffee. They are, however, the exception rather than the rule.

described above. I met Shawn when he gave a talk at the 2014 SCAA conference in Seattle. He began by asking the audience – a packed room of perhaps 100 people – by asking them what quality was: is it how the coffee tastes, or how much money you get for it? (Steiman 2014). In his talk and in his chapters in an edited volume on coffee, he defines quality as “degree of excellence” (Steiman 2013a:304) based on organoleptic<sup>76</sup> criteria. He points out that these criteria vary across space and time, but that the specialty industry has some commonly accepted ideas about what constitutes quality coffee, even when those ideas are difficult to put into words or to quantify.

The challenge in scientifically determining quality is that while it is possible to see changes in the coffee genome, or to measure yields and average cherry size, these changes do not automatically translate to taste. The only way to measure taste to date is with people, who are notoriously bad at this task. Nonetheless, although researchers at the University of Illinois have developed an electronic nose capable of replacing humans, I have yet to hear of its adoption within the specialty industry, or even to hear anyone refer to the possibility of replacing human testers with other, less subjective instruments. In commenting on the nose’s invention in 2010, bloggers wrote that “remarkably, the primary industrial method of quality control for coffee remains the use of human smell and taste, in spite of the inherent non-quantitative and often subjective limitations that such ‘organoleptic’ analysis implies... [The nose] demonstrated flawless discrimination among the 10 brands and could determine roasting conditions such as the length of time and the temperatures at which the coffee beans were roasted” (Futurity 2010) – skills which a few may possess, but which are hardly commonplace.

For whatever reason – because the nose is not as fully developed as the 2010 article suggested, because it is too expensive, or because despite the fact that “people are lousy instruments” (Steiman 2014) and sensory science is expensive and difficult – human cuppers have yet to be replaced by machines, at least when it comes to specialty coffee. Even if electronic noses were to replace people as

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<sup>76</sup> Steiman defines organoleptic as “refer[ring] to the experience of the senses, particularly the senses of taste and smell” (Steiman 2013a:304).



sensory tools, this would still not solve the major challenge of coffee science: that it has thus far been lacking the right people with the right tools asking the right questions about quality and its origins (Steiman personal communication). Despite these challenges, Steiman has attempted to scientifically connect factors of production to organoleptic quality. Unless otherwise noted, the below is my summary of his findings (Steiman 2013b:292-303; 2014). I will discuss the ramifications of these findings, and how they differ from circulating narratives both among farmers and industry elites, later in this dissertation.

### **Genetics**

The genus *Coffea* includes 130 different species, though nearly all specialty comes from *Arabica*. The varieties of *Arabica* (e.g. Typica, Caturra, Catuai) are known to have different taste profiles, but while genetics and varieties are frequently cited in discussions about cup quality, to date there has been little scientific inquiry into the impact of genetics on taste (see Appendix for the most common varieties in Costa Rica). Because there are so many environmental factors to consider, it is nearly impossible to separate out nature from nurture: two varieties would have to be grown side-by-side in order to begin to assess the genetic impact on taste. Steiman is careful to note here and elsewhere in his research that this does not mean that genetics have no impact on taste or quality, simply that there is currently no scientific, replicable, research demonstrating genetic causation. Much of what is “known” about coffee, he said, agreeing with Mark Overly, is anecdotal: the few scientific textbooks focus more on chemical changes during roasting, fertilizer mixes, or the like, rather than laying out causation, correlation, and the effects of particular interventions such as increasing shade cover or planting hybrid varieties.

### **Environment**

Again, it is extremely difficult to tease out the impact of various environmental factors on coffee quality, but place does matter. How it matters is still up for debate, however. Among the environmental factors Steiman discusses – elevation, temperature, light, nutrition and soil, and pests – elevation is a “strong ideal” within the industry: as with shade, higher elevation is assumed to automatically equal

better coffee. In Steiman's own experiments and his review of the literature, however, he is much more cautious: some studies have found that higher elevations lead to less bitter, more acidic coffee, but the relationship between elevation and acidity or bitterness is not a linear one. And since coffee (probably) does not respond to air pressure, elevation is really, Steiman argues, a means of discussing temperature (higher elevations have cooler temperatures, particularly at night), but there have been no published studies explicitly linking temperature with cupping scores. Moreover, discussions of elevation do not usually consider the site's distance from the equator: coffee grown at the limits of the tropics will receive different amounts of sunlight throughout the day and year, so that comparing coffee grown at a certain altitude in Kenya to coffee grown at the same height in Hawai'i is not a fair or accurate comparison.<sup>77</sup>

With respect to shade, despite the efforts of the "bird-friendly", shade-grown label, Steiman's research has shown conflicting results on the impact of shade: in some cases it decreases acidity, body, and sweetness, while in other studies these characteristics were improved by providing shade cover. Shade is one of the most contentious topics among farmers and between farmers and buyers, perhaps because it links the management of the environment and the management of producers in order to yield more desirable coffee.

The soil composition of coffee fields is linked to shade trees and their genetic composition: biodiversity studies have found that the right combination of plants can result in nutrient-neutral activity; that is, the nutrients that coffee removes from the soil can be replaced by certain kinds of plants, and vice versa (Perfecto, et al. 1996; Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC) 2001; 2007). Yet just as with shade, there is great debate among farmers and within the industry about the benefits of

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<sup>77</sup> The need for increased elevation declines with distance from the Equator: Kenyan and other equatorial coffees need more height because they need to overcome the constant heat. In Hawai'i and other regions at the northern- or southern-most extent of coffee's range, that same elevation would be too cold for the coffee to survive, whereas the lower elevations possible in Hawai'i would produce stressed, overheated coffee, if any at all, in Kenya. Steiman's edited volume contains charts that link temperature, latitude, and elevation.

adding additional nutrients via fertilizers, be they chemical or organic. Steiman's work has found no correlation between cup quality and soil attributes, nor between chemical and organic fertilizer: though the farmer might be able to tell the difference (in terms of price and volume needed), the plant cannot. This does not mean, however, that nutrients do not affect the plant at all, just that no studies have shown a definite correlation between cupping score and nutrient availability. The question, again, is what is meant by the term quality: there is evidence that these nutrients affect the size and number of cherries, as healthier plants will produce more than those that are barely able to survive.

### **Processing and Storage**

Processing clearly impacts how coffee *tastes*, but this is not the same thing as affecting its *quality*. As seen in the section on cupping, natural or honey processing involves leaving the cherry on the seed until dry, resulting in a stronger, fruitier aroma and flavor. Washed or wet processing, on the other hand, removes the cherry immediately and then sets the seed to soak in order to remove the sticky-sweet mucilage left by the cherry. There is also a semi-washed method, popular in Indonesia, in which cherries are removed partway through the process. In Steiman's own research and in that of the few studies published on the topic, there was no significant difference in cupping scores between these processes – unless they were improperly dried or stored, which results in the coffee rotting. Of course, there are many opinions on whether naturals are, all other things being equal, as good as washed or semi-washed, particularly since this processing method has one of the most obvious effects on how the coffee tastes (and smells).

No matter what their processing method, coffee stored under the same conditions and in hermetically sealed bags (known as Grain-Pro bags) had the same cup score after 180 days. The studies did not consider longer-term storage: at some point, probably around the year mark, coffee begins to taste “papery” or “cardboardy,” attributes which would significantly decrease its score. There is much

disagreement on when this happens and how to prevent it, but it is not a question that has been asked in a laboratory.

### **Nurture and Culture**

Steiman also discusses the role of human activity in coffee quality, including harvesting and processing practices as well as ideas about how to maintain coffee fields. “We all kind of agree that ripe tastes better,” he said in his talk, referring to the labor-intensive practice of only harvesting ripe cherries, the most common starting point for farmers looking to improve their selling price, “but no science has ever tested it. It doesn’t mean it’s not true – maybe the evidence is just so strong that no one’s bothered to study it scientifically.” Yet harvesting only ripe cherries is difficult and time-consuming, requiring an immense amount of effort on the part of overseers as well as millers to ensure that only red cherries are processed together. In Honduras, for example, farmers are used to stripping the branch, pulling off leaves and sticks along with all the cherries, ripe or not. This means that pickers only have to pass through a field once, since they are not waiting for individual cherries to ripen. The foreman at a large farm near Copán told me that this method was the most common because the price had never justified more effort. Of course, he said, they would in theory get a higher price if they put in more effort to separate out the cherries, but it’s not guaranteed, and it requires pickers to be much more highly skilled. Almost anyone can strip coffee, but selectively picking out ripe cherries while leaving others in the same bunch to mature is quite difficult.

In his public talk as well as in personal communication, Steiman reiterated that while scientific studies on cup quality are inconclusive, much of what is attributed to environmental or biological factors with regards to cup quality is more likely due to nurture – to the efforts put forth by the farmer at various stages. This squares with my own findings that those who spend more time in their fields grow better coffee. They are more likely to notice pests and disease, better able to adapt shade and fertilizer conditions to meet the specifics of their fields, and generally more attuned to the needs of their plants.

Manuel, the Tarrazú farmer, was emphatic that coffee could not be a part-time job: even though each plant does not require individual attention every day, getting the most out of each one is not a task that can be achieved by occasionally dropping by the field.

### ***Achieving Betterness Through Arbitrary Intervention?***

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One of the many difficulties for producers is that there is no single recipe to higher cup scores, and no way to know what the next big thing might be: for example, naturals were seen as overpowering or unsophisticated, until suddenly they were not. Malic acid was a fault, until it was not. Because there are so many variables, and because the timelines with coffee are so long, it is impossible to replicate interventions either in scientific studies or on other farms. Again, the result is that much of what is known to date is anecdotal, passed from farmer to farmer and roaster to roaster either through personal communication or at events like the SCAA conference. Sometimes this information is translatable to other environmental contexts, but not always. This complexity, which I have described in only the most limited and superficial detail here, means that it is much more straightforward for certifying bodies to require specific, measurable, manageable interventions than it is to try and tailor programs to each farm, or to tell farmers to spend more time in their fields, or to listen more to their plants. And for better or for worse, donors and consumers are also looking for measurable interventions and results. Sociologist Daniel Jaffee's book on coffee cooperatives in Oaxaca notes that many organic requirements seem to be in place only to make consumers feel better, such as the requirement that farmers use only organic methods even on plots designated for their own subsistence or for sale outside the organic label (Jaffee 2007). It is much easier to count trees per acre, or unilaterally ban chemicals, or praise the altitude of a given farm, than it is to provide even the limited the information I have here, with all of the necessary caveats. After all, after almost two hundred years of widespread coffee production it is still unknown what produces "better" coffee, and how to quantify that. Whether it is, for

example, the fertilizer acting on the plant, or whether that fertilizer is simply a proxy for more care and attention and better hearing, is still to be unraveled by plant and soil scientists.

To date, the best measure of coffee “quality” and “better-ness” is the cup score, but even that, as we have seen, is the result of a process of negotiation and storytelling. As noted in the previous chapter, specialty’s surplus value comes from the ability of its purveyors to narrate a story about the coffee, blending innate characteristics (e.g. varietal) with environmental ones (e.g. altitude, shade cover, processing), social mores (e.g. farmer health and wellbeing, environmental conservation), and personal approbation (the ability of the consumer to notice and describe differences in the cup). Yet with the exception of the Tim Wendelboes and the Blue Bottles of the coffee world, most shops cannot constantly change their inventory and expect customers to a) care and b) keep up. Even though the specialty narrative celebrates uniqueness and subtle differences, there is a limit to how much those differences can actually vary. That is, specialty coffee is caught in the difficult trap of at once presenting a product that varies with human and environmental manipulation at all stages of the commodity chain while also controlling and limiting that manipulation so that consumers can recognize their favorite blend/roast/preparation method and can be recognized in turn for their sensory skills.

It is a rationally irrational process: the coffee must be handcrafted, and therefore both superior in quality to conventional and subject to the variation that is blasted out of beans during roasting, but the variation has to be controllable and quantifiable, or else it cannot be proven to be superior. It is assumed by the industry that the perfect balance between artisanal (and thus subjective and irrational) and scientific (and thus objective and rational) processes can be achieved and maintained, yielding a product far superior to that of conventional coffee (which is only scientific, and thus lacking the inherent “quality” of specialty coffee). But this making of quality cannot be decoupled from the processes of production: part of the proof of artisanal crafting is in demonstrating how something is made.

This (somewhat) individual genealogy and traceability is what separates it from the anonymous, Fordist assembly-line coffee, and it is in the representation of farmers and farm work that specialty coffee can distinguish itself from conventional in a way that even the least-developed palate can understand. Not everyone can, or cares to, taste stone fruit or caramel in their coffee, but anyone who has been suitably primed can look at a picture of a smiling farmer and make the connection between that farmer's happiness and the beverage they are about to consume. By painting all farmers as happy, or as poor but worthy of saving because of their labors of love, specialty inadvertently reinforces the message of neoliberalism that individual action and responsibility is paramount. And because so much of the process of determining quality is arbitrary, or at best, rests on a shaky scientific foundation, the narrative of love and distinction becomes increasingly important.

What it does not do, as I have argued in this chapter, is to fundamentally strip specialty coffee of the attributes that make it a commodity: no matter how much the rhetoric imbues it with attributes of the gift, specialty is nonetheless bought and sold because of its use value. Moreover, despite what I feel are the best intentions of many purveyors, the use of the narratives of love, gifts, and stories to describe the work of farmers only serves to further the classed divide between producers and purveyors. For example, many marketing campaigns and blog posts focus on the fact that many farmers have never tasted their own coffee, usually because all of it is exported, sometimes because they do not have a roaster (Cycon 2007; Lyon 2010; Lyon and Moberg 2010; West 2012). This story is then used to sell coffee to consumers, trafficking in the language of inequality, connection, and the purveyor-as-savior to convince those consumers that their purchase can make a difference.

I do not wish to denigrate purveyors who bring roasted coffee back to origin, or who invest in roasters and cupping rooms in cooperatives, or who engage in any number of other projects designed to improve the lives of farmers and their families, many of which are not used as marketing pitches but which are invisible to all but the producers themselves. Instead, I want to point out that specialty coffee,

far from upending the economic models of inequality that are the legacies of colonialism and imperialism, is very much a classed endeavor that expresses regret at such inequality while also using it to sell a product. It is classed at the point of consumption, aimed squarely at those with the time, energy, and social and economic capital to learn to taste particular kinds of distinction. And it is certainly classed at the point of production, where the system is so structurally limiting that once farmers achieve middle-classness, as in the case of Orosi, they are essentially priced out of coffee production altogether: they can no longer afford to live, or perhaps better said scrape by, on the low prices paid for their coffee. The answer to the problem of low prices is not to find a way to work outside the C market price, but one that asks farmers to put ever-more effort into differentiating their product. Mark Overly of Kaladi Coffee sums up the problem in a blog post:

For years, farmers have been told that if they want higher prices for their coffee they needed to improve quality; quality defined largely as grading standards that required the investment of expensive processing equipment. This isolated small farmers who had little access to such equipment. Many of these farmers have come together, forming cooperatives, collectively investing in processing mills to bring their coffee up to the same standards of wealthier plantations. Now they are told this is not enough if you want to add value. Now you need to create a "micro-lot," a limited amount of bags, and enter it into a competition. Maybe you take extra care with this lot, make a real effort; only to find that the one that wins is a coffee that had some random ferment happen to it. The evaluators go gaga over it. "Is that Muscadine? Jambul? It's so juicy!" (Overly 2014b)

As we will see in the case of Orosi, producers have been unwilling to form cooperatives or to jump through what they see as unnecessary hoops to earn these higher prices. On a larger scale, however, the focus on the qualities of the beans themselves, and of the need for farmers to love their labor in order to improve these qualities, hyper-fetishizes the commodity by essentially eliminating the ecological and social conditions of production (Overly 2014b) even as it highlights a very particular version of those conditions as part of its marketing rhetoric.



## Chapter Five: Specialty Demands in Local Contexts

If specialty coffee has been on the rise in the West, fueled by new markets and new ideas about consumption and flavor, it has been on the decline in Costa Rica, where coffee has been surpassed by bananas, pineapples, tourism, and microchips as the leading contributors to GDP. And although it would seem that specialty coffee would find a welcoming home in Costa Rica, which has, like the specialty industry, long considered itself an exception surrounded by a sea of mediocrity, this has not proven to always be the case. Instead, specialty coffee's narratives and practices of connection are frequently out of sync with those that circulate in Costa Rica, where state and geography map onto potential as well as desire. These narratives are more than just stories of self or marketing propaganda: they inform how the various actors across the commodity chain act and react to new challenges and demands as well as to each other. And although on the surface these narratives appear to be the same – better coffee and a better life for farmers – the reality is that because these narratives come from such different places and have such different goals, they allow people to talk past each other while thinking they are talking to each other.

In the last two chapters I examined the rise of specialty coffee as one based around the idea that you have to be able to tell the story of coffee, that in order to sell it as something different from, and more valuable than, commodity coffee you have to be able to trace it back to origin. In this chapter I look at several other narratives that circulate within and alongside that of specialty: those of Fair Trade and those of farmers in Tarrazú and Hojancha, where farmers are still farmers who epitomize the ideal of the Costa Rican *campesino* in ways no longer available to Orosians. In the final chapter, I look at ECOM, the multinational company that buys Orosi's coffee and finally, the contemporary narratives of Orosian farmers themselves. The stories matter because they demonstrate the disconnect that exists between most specialty purveyors and the coffee farmers that supply them. For Orosi, they also

demonstrate that the social system in which coffee made sense is now gone, and nothing, not even specialty coffee, has stepped in to replace it.

### ***Fair Trade and the Marketing of Paternalism***

In the third chapter, I discussed Fair Trade in terms of the commodification of connection. In this section I look at the way that Fair Trade USA has created and circulated its primary narrative: that the problems facing farmers are primarily economic, rather than structural or historical, and therefore require only economic solutions to solve. That is, Fair Trade certifications are only secondarily about the coffee itself. Instead, “better” coffee comes about by farmers receiving a higher price, organizing into cooperatives, and learning business skills to help them help themselves. Consumers contribute by choosing to make the right decision in purchasing certified coffee.

On its face, Fair Trade is indeed the “easy” solution that it purports itself to be. The phrase is repeated throughout *Fair Trade: The Story*, an eight minute marketing video released in 2006 (TransFair USA 2006). “It’s so easy!” says the grocery chain buyer in the film. All she had to do was decide to be more fair, pick up the phone and call her suppliers, ask for Fair Trade, and then put up a display at the store. She explains that instead of simply talking about doing the right thing, she was able to do the right thing – the implication being that it is equally easy for you, the consumer, to actually do the right thing, too, and that if you do not, you are choosing to be morally bereft. The managers at a university coffeeshop noted that not only was it easy to stock Fair Trade coffee, but that it allowed their customers to consume “with a conscience.” Paul Rice, Fair Trade USA’s CEO, adds that Fair Trade is about breaking a model that doesn’t work and realigning interests, so that rather than fighting each other, each part of the supply chain, from farmers to customers, can work together. It’s easy for everyone, it seems – everyone, that is, but the farmers themselves.

In exchange for minimum prices, guaranteed buyers, and access to myriad development, empowerment, and awareness programs, would-be Fair Trade producers must organize into a

cooperative and comply with a rigorous and growing list of social, environmental, and economic standards.<sup>78</sup> They must also pay for the certification process, a cost which was once borne by purchasers but has since been transferred to farmers and which can reach into the thousands of dollars (Bacon 2008; Fridell 2007; Jaffee 2007; Raynolds, et al. 2007; Reichman 2008). And they must listen to foreigners telling them how to grow their coffee. While local cooperative managers with whom I have spoken in Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala understand the hows and whys behind new processes, they acknowledge that they face challenges in explaining to their members why, for example, the social premium cannot be simply given over to the farmer, but must be invested in the cooperative in some fashion. This investment is tagged as “democracy” and a means to teach better business practices to otherwise uneducated farmers, to enable themselves to create their own conditions of possibility, but as we will see at the end of this chapter for farmers it can come across as paternalism wrapped in the language of fairness and rectifying injustice. In the end, Fair Trade is as thoroughly neoliberal as the systems it purports to be subverting, as evidenced by its emphasis on individual responsibility – at both ends of the commodity chain – and its insistence that more consumption is the solution to structural problems of inequality.

Despite these challenges, the necessity for a certification like Fair Trade has come about because of the collapse of the coffee agreements and the retreat or inefficacy of states. In the case of Costa Rica, ICAFE continues to do much of the work borne by Fair Trade, but there is a sense that an organization that once defended coffee producers is increasingly on the side of large landowners, millers, and exporters rather than smallholders. Additionally, state programs in Costa Rica weaken with geographic distance from San José, so that farmers on the margins, such as those in Guanacaste, often do not enjoy the same access and resources as those closer to the center. In spaces like this, there is an increasingly need for programs that can step into the gaps and assist farmers. While states or

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<sup>78</sup> As of December 2013 there is a pilot program which is working with independent farmers, but the results are not yet available.

international agreements might be better suited to address the structural issues at hand, they are not doing so, and thus it is up to voluntary certifications like Fair Trade to provide environmental and social oversight, entering into direct relationships with consumers via the gap created by the ICA's collapse (Bacon 2004:499; West 2012:45-46). The problem is that because of its focus on conscious consumption and its attempt to be broadly applicable, it fails to account for different understandings of coffee production within and across countries. Fair Trade stakes its entire model on the notion that the fairest system is one that is universal; hence farmers in Kenya and Costa Rica abide by the same environmental restrictions and receive the same price for their goods. It is for this reason that Fair Trade has less of a presence in Costa Rica than it does in other producing countries: the price floor, for many, is not high enough to justify the extra effort. In places like Tarrazú, Fair Trade may be implemented alongside other certifications, as there is already a bureaucratic structure in place to handle the paperwork and inspection process. That is, they are already doing much of the work required by Fair Trade, and have full-time staff dedicated to compliance, so the additional cost of checking off a few more boxes, or bringing in another inspector, is not as high as it is elsewhere. For buyers, they are able to add value beyond the (theoretically higher) price minimum by selling "triple-certified" (Fair Trade, organic, and shade-grown) coffee to their consumers. In Hojancha, where coffee quality as measured by altitude is among the lowest in Costa Rica, we will see that Fair Trade is what lets farmers keep farming, even if they do not all understand or agree with its requirements.

### **Bring About A More Generous World**

From a social justice perspective, Fair Trade seems like a path to incremental change that could one day bring about its own demise – that is, a truly fair world system where socially just goods no longer need their own label. Yet what Fair Trade actually does is to form part of what Paige West calls fictitious political ecology narratives (2012:41), made possible by the neoliberalization of the world economy, the retreat of the state, and the increasing reliance on individualized solutions to structural

problems. Fair Trade is not alone in presenting this narrative: it runs throughout specialty coffee to one degree or another. But in non-certified specialty narratives, the idea is that the physical labor of the farmer inheres in the quality of the bean, which can then be tasted by the consumer. Although one cannot “taste” hard work in the same way that one tastes chocolate or citrus, the research on quality presented in the previous chapter indicates that the efforts of farmers, and not just the altitude of their farm, may in fact have some bearing on cup quality. Although Fair Trade argues that its program leads to a better life for farmers and a better cup of coffee for consumers (TransFair USA 2006), the quality of the cup is not the primary focus. Instead, it is a story of consumer compassion, of creating better lives for everyone by breaking through an anonymous, byzantine and uncaring economic system to connect to farmers directly.

In her recent ethnography of tea workers on Fair Trade plantations in Darjeeling, India, Sarah Besky writes that “power lies in the ability to mobilize imaginaries of injustice as much as in proffering visions of justice” (Besky 2014:20). In the case of both tea workers and coffee farmers, the morality of certain kinds of consumption is tied to fetishized ideas about land and labor that imagine an impoverished but idyllic agrarian lifestyle. By using its power to frame social justice as an economic solution to an economic problem, Besky argues that Fair Trade disregards the larger constellations of inequalities in which tea workers are enmeshed (Besky 2014). The same is true in the case of coffee, where formal programs like Fair Trade, and the informal direct-trade or relationship programs undertaken by individual roasters/retailers, coincide in focusing on the price received by farmers to the exclusion of all other concerns. Certainly the low price paid to farmers is a problem: it is too low for most Orosians to continue working in coffee full-time. But like Orosi’s postcard vision of the past that cuts ugliness and difference out of the picture, so too does the moral framing of farmer justice as one in which farmers need only to receive higher prices to solve their problems.

Fair Trade is neither possible nor needed in Orosi: not possible, because farmers there will not form a cooperative and are unwilling to follow Fair Trade's many requirements if they did, and not needed, because the price farmers receive is higher than the C price and almost always higher than the Fair Trade minimum. As we will see below, in Tarrazú, where the price differential above the C is even higher, I suspect that the cooperatives became Fair Trade certified only because it cost them so little, and further demonstrates to buyers that Tarrazú is a place that cares about its people and its environment. The majority of Fair Trade coffee in Costa Rica comes from the north, in the provinces of Alajuela and Guanacaste, where elevations tend to be lower and, as I will demonstrate, the distance from San José has left locals lacking in state protections and benefits. It is not necessarily Fair Trade's responsibility to address these broader problems, but by framing their efforts as economic solutions to economic problems, it limits consumers from understanding the full scope of the structural problems coffee farmers face and limits the possibility for farmers to fully participate as equals rather than as recipients of a sympathetic if not condescending Northern gaze.

Here, I want to focus on the first assertion above: the connection between Fair Trade and fetishized ideas of land and labor. Farming is depicted as inherently virtuous, a labor of love that men and women are willing to undertake even though it pays so little. When presented with the economic opportunity of Fair Trade, the marketing materials suggest that farmers unilaterally use the money to send their children to school, or keep them in school, or diversify their diets. They learn the proper business practices that have ostensibly been limiting their ability to sell their own coffee, and they do it together, cooperating to make life better for everyone. These narratives are put out into the world through posters, coffee bags, and websites that constantly reinforce the otherness of farmers, who are uniformly brown or black skinned, smiling, and often surrounded by the children who have benefitted from Fair Trade's guaranteed price. Fair Trade consumers, in contrast, are white women: the 2007 Fair Trade Almanac, an end-of-the-year report of Fair Trade USA (then TransFair USA)'s activity, had only

white females pictured consuming Fair Trade (TransFair USA 2007). The Fair Trade USA website hosts an array of images and videos intended for consumers to use on their own websites, on Facebook, and if they are retailers, on their own packaging or in their store windows. As of October 2014, these materials are organized by category: Fair Trade Month (October), Mother's Day, and Holidays 2013 (non-denominational, but the emphasis on baking suggests Christmas). There are sample tweets, Facebook cover photos, and even sample Facebook posts for each category, truly living up to the notion that supporting Fair Trade is easy – so easy, you don't even have to write your own content. The Mother's Day images all include the same caption, "Moms make a world of difference," and showcase smiling women picking coffee, carrying flowers, harvesting cocoa, and holding a sugar cane, while the final image is of a group of women selecting tea and waving at the camera. An infographic on the page goes even further: "It turns out good practices and good products go hand in hand. A growing number of farmers, factories, businesses, and consumers are seeing how investing in people best secures the future of the products (and planet) we love. By purchasing Fair Trade, you join a virtuous circle that improves lives, protects the environment, and produces high-quality products for you and your family to enjoy" (Fair Trade USA 2014). But the imagery used to sell Fair Trade creates value by portraying primitive, poor farmers who would like to hold on to a traditional way of life and can only do so with the aid of Northern consumers; ironically, in their universality and decontextualization these images end up flattening the "richness of social relations" this marketing is attempting to create (West 2012:239). The result is that one farmer stands in for all farmers, and frequently, the product itself stands in for the farmer either as an individual or as a category.

Rather than "reshap[ing] how products are made and consumed" and "influenc[ing] how we relate to each other as human beings" (DeCarlo 2007:3), Fair Trade promotes more of the same: foreigners telling farmers what to do, and tying economic incentives to practices that may make sense in a boardroom, or in the country where they were developed, but are not necessarily useful or practical

everywhere. This is not just an academic critique, or a disagreement about marketing choices, but one that is very much the lived experience of many farmers who are part of certified cooperatives. One panel at the SCAA meetings in April 2013 brought together representatives from three certifiers (Utz Kapeh, Rainforest Alliance, and Fair Trade USA) and three managers from certified cooperatives in Latin America. The conversation was in Spanish, except when one of the certifiers or moderators, some of whom were monolingual in English, had to make use of the simultaneous translation service. Each certifier presented their program's goals and then the cooperative representatives discussed their experiences with the inspectors and with the programs more generally. Each manager first noted the benefits of certification, but then expressed frustration with what felt like capricious regulations, subject to change on the whim of the inspector: one inspector would interpret something one way, and the next year a different inspector would interpret it differently, or not care about that requirement at all. Sometimes inspectors arrived on bad days when everything was going wrong: because they had only one day to conduct the entire visit, they would come away with a skewed impression of operations.

More revealing than the capriciousness of human inspectors attempting to applying reams of regulations to wildly diverse systems of organization and record-keeping was the utter shock on the faces of the certifiers and moderators. They attempted to rebut the claims of the cooperative representatives, arguing either that members had misunderstood the requirements for certification or the inspector's method at arriving at conclusions. "It isn't looking for evidence [of noncompliance], it's obtaining it and verifying it," said the Fair Trade representative, to general shouts of discord from the farmers present in the audience. "What the auditor is looking for is often not what the cooperative understands. You can't look at this certification the same way you look at others."

The Guatemalan cooperative representative who spoke was polite, but firm in his disagreement, saying that it was unfair that the cooperative did not have a chance to talk back to the certifying organization. Moreover, he said, "sometimes we are a little offended with the personal questions asked



by the auditors about how people live. It's all one-way – we aren't allowed to ask them the same things. And it's very hard to teach different criteria to people who have never gone to school." When the requirements changed year to year, it put an immense amount of pressure on cooperative managers to explain the new criteria and the reasoning behind it, and given the complexity of the audits and the number of required documents, the rationale was not always clear to managers, either. There was, one Salvadoran farmer said during the open-question period, "*un desbalance con los requisitos*" – an imbalance in the requirements, and a "*desconocimiento de la realidad*" on the part of the inspectors – a lack of knowledge or understanding of their everyday reality. His statement was met with thunderous applause while the monolingual English speakers waited for the translation to come through. When it did, they sat in stony silence, probably grateful that the panel had come to the end of its allotted time.

By focusing on economic solutions to economic problems, and by positioning individuals at both ends of the chain, rather than institutions, as the means to achieve change, Fair Trade misses the structural challenges faced by farmers in achieving a better quality of life – and thus misses out on the opportunity to teach consumers about those structural problems and to understand the complexities involved in coffee production, from the legacies of colonialism to the everyday indignities of having to answer to auditors who do not have to answer back to you. Too, the question of "fairness" is left unasked: what does fair mean? If fair means that everyone who does X job earns the same amount, then Fair Trade is fair. But if it means that everyone who does X job earns a living wage, or a dignified wage, then it is falling short of its potential. And if Fair Trade's narrative of coffee is that farmers have to receive a higher price and participate in democracy, then ICAFE, the Costa Rican Coffee Institute's, narrative is that Costa Ricans in the industry must all work together to maintain the country's good name on the world market. In this section, I detail the ways in which ICAFE has worked within the historical division of labor to manage and maintain quality for many, if certainly not all, of Costa Rica's coffee farmers.

## ***Divisions of Labor: Specialization Without Specialty***

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It is hard to imagine that this relationship between members of the coffee sector elite and many of the coffee pickers could exist in a country other than Costa Rica. The fact is that many of these humble farmworkers were themselves smallholder coffee farmers who were to play – and still do – a decisive role in the formation of a one-of-a-kind production structure, a profit-sharing and a quality-control and improvement system that have made Costa Rican coffee what it is today...each year bringing forth from the earth a new crop of coffee, the taste of which not only expresses the virtues of its soil, climate, and superior cultivation practices but also the well-being, education, culture, and access each coffee picker has to basic services and social security. (Gamboa and ICAFE 2013:11)

In the first chapter, I noted that coffee elites were the owners of the *beneficios*, the mills that turn raw coffee cherries into shelf-stable green coffee ready for export. Though not strictly falling under the heading of “family,” this organizational system has also been responsible both for past expectations of and reliance on coffee, as well as for the difficulties that farmers today encounter in getting higher prices for their crop. Unlike in Honduras, where most smallholders process their own coffee cherry, or in Guatemala, where there is a wide range of systems, in Costa Rica very few farmers process their own coffee. Instead, cherry is brought to the mill, at which point it ceases to be the farmer’s responsibility. In places like Tarrazú, in the mountains to the southwest of Orosi, or Hojanca de Guanacaste, to the far northwest, the *beneficio* is owned by a cooperative to which local farmers belong, but in Orosi there is not now, nor has there ever been, a cooperative. The *beneficio* is today owned and managed by ECOM, and most of Orosi’s harvest is sold to Starbucks.

This division of labor has important ramifications for social organization as well as access to the increasingly specialized markets discussed in previous chapters. Farmers who do not have to process their coffee are able to focus, unsurprisingly, on farming, whether coffee or bananas or tomatoes or other agricultural goods, as the skill set, and kinds of investment, required for processing are completely different from those of farming. The smaller farms that dominate the Central Valley only require additional labor power during the harvest, which lasts only a few weeks. Though farmers who do not process are unable to access any of the value added during processing, they also do not run any of the

risks faced by processors, and they do not need to invest in machinery or storage facilities. Finally, they do not need to create or maintain relationships with foreign buyers, take on the risk and bureaucracy of customs and shipping, or wait months to be paid.

At the end of each day of the harvest, farmers must get their raw cherry to the *beneficio*. It must be done immediately, for within twenty-four hours after picking the cherries will start to rot. For those with pickup trucks, this means driving it themselves to the receiving area, where the coffee is weighed. Farmers who hire temporary workers will have already kept track of how much cherry each harvester brought in, and will have paid them accordingly, usually on a daily but sometimes on a weekly basis. Farmers with pickup trucks who do not live near a mill will bring the day's harvest to a *recolector*, a receiving station. These are set strategically along rural roads; at the end of each day, a truck belonging to the mill will come to collect all the cherry received during the day. Farmers who do not have pickups can have one of the mill trucks come to them; in most cases the cost of transport is deducted from their earnings. The mill and the farmer each keep track of the total received weight, and the minimum amount paid is determined by ICAFE. The price depends on several factors, including the current price on the New York Commodities Market and any additions or subtractions for bringing in particularly high or low quality beans.

### **“El café no se vende, se entrega”**

There is a popular saying that “*el café no se vende, se entrega*” – coffee is not sold [to the mill], it is delivered. The idea is that farmers are not employees of the mill, delivering the results of that day's efforts for a set wage. Nor are they contractors, peons, or in any other way subordinate to those who control the means of turning raw cherry into *grano de oro*, the “golden bean” ready for export. Instead it is a partnership, one in which each link in the commodity chain plays his or her role in bringing the

crop to export. Together they receive a proportionate share of the earnings.<sup>79</sup> ICAFE's recent book on coffee production goes so far as to include the coffee itself in this partnership: "Coffee is much more than [an important export]: it is a living tradition, a fellow Costa Rican, a compatriot without which our landscape would be unrecognizable" (Gamboa and ICAFE 2013:49). The saying is a recognition that each link is critical, and that each person (and object) is part of a team. It is consistent with the Costa Rican notion of egalitarianism, and with a national identity based on the premise of a demopfectocracy. It is in some ways an anti-capitalist ideal, for rather than an alienated worker laboring for hourly or piece-work wages, with profits extracted from the underpayment of such labor (Marx 1978[1972]), the miller and the farmer are seen as equals, mutually dependent on each other. It is one more way in which coffee works to reinforce notions of solidarity and provide the ideological underpinning for the social welfare state apparatus. As mills find themselves increasingly subjected to regulation and oversight by buyers – or, as in the case of Orosi, *become* the buyers – this relationship is shifting more and more to one of worker and manager, with the former subordinate to the latter.

In the coffee imaginary farmers might not sell their coffee to the mill, but in terms of bookkeeping and responsibility it is very much a sale, albeit one governed by the same concept, at least on paper, of equality and fairness that gave rise to the saying. By law, each mill must pay the same amount per pound to anyone who brings them acceptable coffee (ICAFE 1992). This price can be higher than the official ICAFE price so long as the mill offers it to everyone, but it cannot be lower. The decision to offer a higher price would be based on contracts with buyers, particularly when the mill fears that farmers will bring their coffee to a rival mill, or when there is a shortage due to bad weather or infestation, leaving them unable to fulfill their contracts. Coffee could be rejected, or receive a lower price, if it was considered unacceptable or deemed lower-grade. This coffee would include a high

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<sup>79</sup> I have heard people make fun of, or perhaps better said, rue the meaning of this phrase. Rather than indicating an equal partnership between all parties, several have used it to mean that with the price so low, selling coffee is basically like giving it away.

percentage of “floaters,” or coffee that is over- or under-ripe, or which has been hollowed out by insects.

Once at the mill, coffee is separated at several different stages. For farmers, the most important separation comes first, when the received coffee is dumped into a large tank of water. Heavier, properly ripe coffee sinks, while poor quality coffee floats (hence the name “floaters”) and is sucked away by tubing, destined to become instant or domestically consumed coffee. Farmers who consistently bring in floaters, or whose cherry is mixed with leaves, sticks, or rocks, will find the mill reluctant to continue purchasing their coffee. Despite the apparent transparency of this process, and the number of measurements taken at each stage, it can be difficult for mills to connect the received cherry with individual farmers, particularly when the *recolectores* are in use. *Recolectores* are essentially storage sheds with an opening in the lower part of one wall, and are usually built on the edge of small hills. Mill



**Image 10: *Recolector* in Orosi**

representatives wait at the *recolector* for farmers who live in more remote areas, and the coffee is weighed via small scales on site. The cherry is then dumped through the opening onto an angled chute, which sits above a truck. Lacking in electricity and running water, these remote stations do not have the capacity to separate out cherry unless for some reason only one farmer brings in his or her harvest that day.

*Recolectores*, which are ubiquitous in coffee farming regions in Costa Rica, thus doubly work toward fairness and access for all farmers: they allow those who live in more remote places to get their coffee to a mill, and they make it hard to keep everyone's coffee separated, thus creating a system in which it makes the most sense for everyone to hand in similar coffee, rather than trying to differentiate themselves in some way. Beyond the role of the *recolectores*, the physical labor required to begin processing coffee also works towards a kind of middle ground status quo. On very busy days, mills may be so occupied with emptying the tanks that they cannot wait long enough to keep each farmer's cherry separate throughout the flotation process; they are turning the receiving bins over as fast as they can in order to begin processing within the 24 hour window. It is here where the risk/reward system comes up against kinship and obligation. Though no one would admit this to me directly, gossip and allegations indicate that family ties would obligate you to look the other way if, for example, you were working the tanks and your cousin's coffee had a few more floaters than it should. Because all farmers are technically paid the same amount, and because the cherry is so frequently mixed together before individuals can be credited for it, it can be extremely difficult to raise the standard of what is being handed over, whether the mill belongs to a private company or to a cooperative.

Manuel, who was a full-time farmer and member of the CoopeDota cooperative in Tarrazú, told me that nearly every problem the cooperative faced began with inconsistent quality. If only one farmer hands in mediocre coffee, it is easy enough for that mediocrity to be lost amidst the entire cooperative's harvest. That farmer does less work – harvesting less selectively, perhaps, applying less fertilizer,

pruning less frequently – but earns the same amount as his neighbors. As long as the price paid to farmers does not drop because of such practices, there is little incentive to call out one's neighbor, or cousin, or uncle, though Manuel did say that with enough social pressure, it was possible to get someone to change their ways, though it was not easy, and you had to have the whole cooperative acting, well, cooperatively to achieve it. Conversely, there is also little incentive to do much better than one's neighbors, because you will not receive a higher price for your efforts unless you are able to sell to another mill – and then you risk the ire of the mill owner or cooperative manager who was counting on your contribution to meet their quotas and promised sales. The system works best when everyone works equally hard and no one tries to outdo one another – an analogy for how Costa Ricans conceive of the welfare state and its benefits, in theory if not always in practice.

Under this sharply divided system of labor, farmers are able to specialize in growing coffee, or are able to combine coffee farming with other occupations. As a result of this division, farmers in Costa Rica receive a smaller percentage of the final sale price than their counterparts elsewhere who also process the coffee and thus maintain control over a much greater portion of the commodity chain. They also run much less risk: processing is a tricky business, involving either a great deal of finger-crossing that it will not rain during a crucial drying stage, or a great deal of investment in infrastructure so that less is left to the vagaries of the weather. In Costa Rica, where the mills are almost exclusively engaged in wet processing, the investment in machinery has also included an investment in monitoring equipment that can track the coffee's chemical changes at each stage from raw cherry to dry parchment. The number of measurements kept by the mills is staggering. Though he would not give me a copy or let me write down any figures, one mill employee flipped through some of the tracking documents on his computer for me – spreadsheets that seemed to go on forever, lists and charts and tiny percentage changes in efficiency from one day to the next. One spreadsheet indicated the preferred times for running particular machinery in order to take advantage of cheaper evening rates for

electricity. Starbucks, he said, would (via ECOM) fine them for even small problems like a machine that leaked a drop of water an hour in an area where nobody walked, so they tracked everything, all the time.

Wet processed mill coffee thus tends to be more consistent than that processed by individual farmers, and because every step of processing is tracked and monitored, buyers can feel confident that their contract requirements for this stage have been met. Moreover, mills have the capital reserves necessary to pay farmers as they turn in their coffee, while waiting to receive their full payments from buyers until the coffee has arrived at its final destination, often months later. Though they can demand certain minimal requirements from farmers, they have no guarantee that farmers will comply, and without a drastic rise in prices, it is difficult to convince farmers that they should be investing more time and money into producing better coffee, a phenomenon that will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter.

### ***Quality in Costa Rica***

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Mills do most of the work that specialty buyers perceive as contributing to higher quality. They separate out overripe and underripened cherries from those that are properly matured, then remove the skin before it starts to ferment. Once the skin is removed, mills then separate out the resulting seeds by size. As mentioned in chapter one, usually in Costa Rica this is done by machine, but at smaller mills it may still be done by hand. The larger the seed, the higher the grade and thus, the higher the price that it can be sold for. Seed size often, although not always, corresponds with cherry size, which is why farmers are exhorted to invest in fertilizers and proper tree spacing so as to grow cherries as large as possible prior to harvesting. In conversations with roasters, I found that they preferred uniform sizing in part because it makes for more even roasting; that is, with unequal sizes some of the coffee will roast darker than the rest, and the coffee will have a similarly uneven taste. Good mills will carefully sort the coffee prior to export, so that roasters do not have to pick through it themselves when it arrives. And finally, by



monitoring moisture in the beans and investing in storage facilities, mills ensure, as much as anything in agriculture can be ensured, that the coffee will not be rotten or damp when it makes it to its final destination.

Nonetheless, the focus of specialty narratives, as well as that of ECOM, the owners of the Orosi mill, is on the work that must be done by farmers to produce good coffee. The role of the mill is often understated, when it is not elided entirely from the narrative, but it is critical to getting good coffee from farm to the retail floor. In chapter four, I described the movement towards full-sun coffee and the counter-movement back towards “traditional” growing methods. The exaltation of non-technified growing techniques does not mean the industry as a whole has ignored scientific innovation, but rather that the scope of the debate has shifted towards which innovations to implement and why. Indeed, as the spreadsheets and tracking documents I was shown indicate, the industry as a whole has become *more* scientific, not less, with the rise of specialty. The need to differentiate within and between ever-shrinking criteria has led to a proliferation of machines, measuring instruments, websites, tracking systems, virtual and face-to-face classes, and consultants to help millers, exporters, roasters, and farmers manage their perfect imperfections. Disagreements over acceptable levels of moisture or drying times have profound implications both for top-down coffee chain management and for farmers, who often feel overwhelmed by the sometimes contradictory requirements placed upon them by their buyers, or who do not trust that these measurements tell them anything they need to know. Even if they felt they could talk back to buyers – and those that do usually do so only in that they stop growing coffee – smallholder farmers are often not in a position to take the necessary measurements themselves (e.g. of soil composition) because of the high costs associated with many of these interventions. As with most industries, risk and reward are not distributed evenly along the supply chain, with different actors taking on different levels of responsibility depending on their ability to negotiate and invest in insurance or technology.

## ICAFE: In Defense of State and Nation

The *Instituto de Defensa del Café*, or Coffee Defense Institute, was created in 1933 in part to mitigate the devastating effects of the Great Depression (Gamboa and ICAFE 2013; Gudmundson 1986; ICAFE 1992:15; Samper Kutschbach and Peters Solorzano 2001). It was a public institution until 1948, when, under the new Constitution, it was transformed into the *Oficina del Café de Costa Rica*, or the Costa Rican Coffee Office, a semiautonomous agency under the Ministry of the Economy; it is now a public non-state institution. Its mission was and is to “direct and control national coffee activity” (ICAFE 1992:15). In 1985 the Office changed its name again to the *Instituto del Café de Costa Rica*, the Costa Rican Coffee Institute or ICAFE. ICAFE is now regulated by a fourteen-member junta whose members are selected by the Executive Branch of the government and who represent producers, millers, exporters, *torrefactores*,<sup>80</sup> and the Costa Rican government.

In the years following the 1948 revolution, the Costa Rican state transitioned from what Edelman (1999) calls an *estado gestor* (manager or facilitator state) to an *estado empresario* (entrepreneurial state). The state aimed to facilitate growth by providing conditions favorable to private capital investment as well as planning projects such as road construction, agricultural productivity innovations, and offering loans at rates favorable to new export commodities (Edelman 1999:56-58). While these conditions set the stage for the debt crisis response of the 1980s and the passage of CAFTA in 2007, at the time they increased state presence in the agricultural sector, particularly in coffee. The shape and formation of this presence took the form of what Li (2007:279) calls a “program,” meaning a “goal to be accomplished, together with the rationale that makes it thinkable, and the associated strategies and techniques” that put this goal into action. These programs, specifically ICAFE, offer insight

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<sup>80</sup> The term *torrefactor* or *torrefacción* can refer to two things. Here, it references roasters located within Costa Rica. It can also be used to refer more specifically to the process of mixing low-grade coffee with sugar and then roasting it, resulting in a pre-sweetened and pre-ground product that is sold at extremely low prices but only within domestic markets. Coffee cannot be legally exported unless it is 100% Arabica coffee, leaving out the 90% coffee/10% sugar *torrefacción* blends that are popular domestically.

into the notions of governmentality of the post-revolutionary Costa Rican state, namely, that the state should exist to provide social and economic support to its citizens in a wide range of guises.

ICAFE was an important part of this *estado empresario* because it set minimum prices to be paid to coffee growers and required producers to provide loans to growers at favorable rates. It also backed the *beneficios*: if the mill was to go bankrupt, farmers would still be paid for their coffee (Edelman 1999; Luetchford 2008; Sick 2008). ICAFE set up experimental farms around the country, coming to some kind of mutually beneficial agreement such as paying farmers to lease their land or granting them the proceeds from harvesting the experimental beans. On these farms, ICAFE agronomists bred together different strains of coffee, tried out new fertilization techniques and pesticides, and, most recently, have tried to find ways to eradicate pests and plagues such as coffee rust.

By law all farms have to be registered with ICAFE, and a representative – sometimes, in my experience, more representatives than workers – supervises the sale of plants between farms to ensure quality and minimize the spread of disease and pests. Moreover, ICAFE subsidizes the purchase of equipment to purify and recycle water and wash beans, as well as offers workshops and certification classes for farmers, millers, and exporters alike. Each year, it provides free or subsidized plants and financing to farmers to help “renovate” their farms: while coffee plants can produce cherries for up to fifty years, after about fifteen their yield diminishes, making each plant not only less profitable but more susceptible to disease and infestation. Due in large part to these measures, for a time Costa Rica had the highest yields per hectare of coffee in the world, allowing production to remain profitable even as prices fluctuated and then dropped on the world market (Edelman 1999:59; ICAFE 1992; 2007; Townsend 2012).

In 1988, Costa Rica made it illegal to grow robusta, and ICAFE embarked on a program to eliminate all remaining robusta plants by the end of 1989, a campaign in which they have by all accounts

been successful (ICAFE 1992; Samper Kutschbach 1994; Townsend 2012:36).<sup>81</sup> This was the same year that the International Coffee Agreement collapsed, strengthening ICAFE's resolve to compete internationally on quality, rather than quantity. More recently, in 2007 ICAFE, with the assistance of INEC (*Instituto de Estadísticas Costarricense*; Costa Rican Statistics Institute) completed an extensive census of coffee production in each of the eight growing regions, including information such as average plot size in each area, number of people employed by age and gender, and yields per hectare. The census found that due to low prices, there was a desperate need for *una renovación de los cafetales*, or a renewal (replanting) of the coffee fields with new plants that give greater yields and better-quality cherries than older plants. At the end of this year, and in the two years following, ICAFE coordinated with other government agencies, principally the Ministry of Agriculture and Cattle and the National Bank of Costa Rica, to undertake a massive renovation project across the country, which included not only replacing old plants, but conducting soil surveys and providing recommendations to farmers for the best fertilizers to use in their fields (ICAFE 2007; Peters 2010).

In 2009 ICAFE approved updated *normas técnicas*, or technical regulations, pertaining to green, roasted, and ground coffee, an attempt to standardize what had been different methods of evaluating quality. For the past few years it has increased its efforts to cross-breed strains that would lead to greater "production, vigor, and resistance to plagues and sicknesses without abandoning the aspects that lead to quality in the cup" (Peters 2010:16). Specifically, the institute has focused on a hybrid known as F1, cross-bred with a hardy Nicaraguan strain and currently under experimental production in Orosi. The presentation I watched in 2010 noted that others, known as "Venecia" and "Obatá," appeared to have the potential to meet ICAFE's vigor, yield, and quality requirements, but were still in the early stages of testing (Peters 2010); by 2013, as we will see below, Obatá had been approved for use in the fight against *roya*, leaf rust.

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<sup>81</sup> Though there is currently a movement underway to re-legalize robusta so that farmers whose land is not suitable for Arabica can still grow coffee. The response when I mentioned this movement was mixed.

Perhaps the biggest change made by ICAFE in the past few years has been the digitalization of many of its documents and reporting requirements. Not only does the ICAFE website (which, despite its semi-autonomous nature, is on the government domain) include, among other resources, information on the history of coffee, the taste profiles of the eight regions, and links to coffee tours around the country, but it has a password-protected section to which all mills and exporters must upload information on a daily basis. These documents are then automatically transferred to the ICAFE database, where mill reports on exports – the number of bags, their destination, whether they are Fair Trade or organic – are tagged with a unique code and then checked against the actual goods received at the port of embarkation (usually Limón on the Atlantic coast). While it seems rather unlikely that ICAFE representatives are able to actually check every single bag that goes into every single container on every single ship, ICAFE employees with whom I spoke insisted that they did. Certainly the documents I have been shown and interviews I have conducted suggest that a great deal of time, money, and manpower is put into ensuring that every bag labeled as Costa Rican coffee is indeed properly labeled and traceable back to the mill, if not the farm, of origin. Much of this information is also available on the public side of the website; though it cannot be easily cross-tabulated, nonetheless there are a wide variety of documents pertaining to pricing, sales, costs, and “coffee activity” available to anyone with an internet connection.

### **La Roya**

As I was writing this dissertation, after completing my fieldwork, a new challenge arose: *la roya*, or leaf rust (*Hemileia vastatrix*).<sup>82</sup> Rust has long been a problem in coffee plantations, but until very recently it was one that cropped up in small batches at the beginning of the season and was considered a minor irritation (McCook 2006; 2009; Saxon 2013). People would reference it during fieldwork, but it was not talked about as anything worse than borer beetles or unpredictable rainfall. It came during the

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<sup>82</sup> Because rust was not a major issue during the fieldwork period, this section relies heavily on newspaper reports rather than participant observation and interviews.

cold part of the season, you dealt with it, and you moved on. When I returned briefly during the summer of 2013, however, rust had become a major problem, something to be deeply concerned about even if it hadn't yet hit one's particular farm. As of November 2013, it was estimated that within Central America, rust was affecting an area the size of Europe (Bernson 2013a). A Forbes article in August 2014 linked *roya*, then estimated to have cost more than \$1 billion in revenue and half a million jobs, to the waves of child migrants flooding into the United States from Central America (Foote 2014). The International Coffee Organization (ICO) estimated that due to a combination of drought in Brazil and rust in Central America, world production would drop by at least two million 100-pound sacks over the 2014-2015 harvest (El Financiero 2014). In November 2013, the organizers of Let's Talk Coffee, a four-day, invitation-only conference held each year in a different producing country, added on a two-day Let's Talk Roya to their El Salvador event specifically to discuss the implications of the outbreak and what the industry could do about it (Bernson 2013b). And the United Nations developed a new smartphone app to let farmers across Central America report *roya* outbreaks, so that they, and their coffee institutes, can track the disease's movement and respond more quickly (Dyer 2014c).

The latest wave of rust is attributed to extreme weather caused by climate change (Arias 2013a; Bernson 2013b; Dyer 2014c; Font 2013; McCook 2009; Saxon 2013). Additionally, as the higher elevations where Arabica is grown have warmed, the fungus has been able to expand and thrive in new habitats, rapidly expanding across the Central American isthmus. There is some evidence that organic farming has also contributed to *roya's* spread, since manual weed control is not enough to stop the fungus's spread and organic fertilizer tends to lead to less resilient plants that cannot fight off the fungus (Quispe Guanica 2007). Since 2012 *roya* has destroyed millions of sacks of coffee, hundreds of thousands of acres, and up to half of some countries' yearly exports, leaving hundreds of thousands of people in a position even more precarious than usual (Arias 2013a; Bernson 2013a; 2013b; Dyer 2014d; Font 2013). It is not impossible to fight it, but it takes coordination and investment on a massive scale.

Colombia is hailed as the leader in rust prevention efforts, mainly because in 2011 it began replacing trees “in a massive fashion” with hybrids that were more resistant to the fungus. Rather than the forty to fifty percent losses in Guatemala, 2014 estimates were that Colombia would lose about seven percent of its harvest to rust (Strochlic 2014).

To do justice to the problems caused by *roya* would take another dissertation; *roya* is in fact the intended focus of my next research project. For now, I want to note that Colombia’s unequivocal success, and Costa Rica’s relative success, in combating rust can be attributed to the fact that both countries have highly organized coffee institutes that have worked to coordinate responses – it does a farmer little good to invest in fungicide or new plants if his neighbors do not take the same precautions. More than anything, combating rust takes money. The Costa Rican government made available \$40 million in aid, intended to reach 48,000 small farmers in various forms, such as new plants, low-interest loans, and debt relief – necessary in a country where more than 60% of farmers were affected in some way during the 2012-2013 harvest (Dyer 2014a; 2014b). USAID has partnered with World Coffee Research to invest \$14 million in long-term *roya* solutions, such as developing more resistant varieties (Dyer 2014d).

ICAFE has taken a leading role: the new plant made available under the government plan is the aforementioned varietal Obatá, developed by Brazilian researchers using a Costa Rican varietal (Sarchí) combined with one from Timor. As part of its partnerships with farmers and dedication to (and ability to invest in) coffee research, ICAFE has been experimenting with Obatá since 2010. The downside of the plant’s resistance, however, is that it requires more fertilizer than other varieties, increasing costs for farmers (Dyer 2014a). In addition to Obatá seedlings, ICAFE and its partner organization in the government, the *Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería* (GAM; Agriculture and Cattle Ministry), distributed fungus-fighting chemicals to around 75% of the country’s 52,000 producers, of whom 92% are small farmers (Arias 2013b). The chemical distribution program had at least some effect: ICAFE

estimates that the 2014-2015 harvest will increase 4.5% compared to the 2013-2014 harvest, attributed mainly to “improved controls implemented by farmers to prevent plagues like *roya* and *broca* [borer beetles]” (El País 2014). ICAFE and GAM have hosted workshops for farmers detailing treatment methods, as not only must fungicide be applied, farmers must do so at specific moments in order to control it. Additionally, ICAFE has declared a “phytosanitary emergency” for the next two years, freeing up funds and additional government support (Guerrero Portilla 2013). Whether this will be enough to contain the rust outbreak is still unknown, but it seems likely that efforts in the form of new varietals, new farming methods, and greater investment in research, not to mention greater world attention to climate change, will continue to be necessary.

### **Risk Management, Quality Management**

The *roya* crisis helps demonstrate that risk is not distributed evenly across the supply chain. Members of the specialty industry have tried to help farmers through donations to World Coffee Research and events like the Let’s Talk Roya conference, but their main concern is quality: though initial reports suggested that *roya* did not affect taste, buyers have recently begun complaining that plants that survive leaf rust produce coffee that tastes “woody” (Bernson 2013a). Though sympathetic to the plight of farmers, purveyors also must be able to sell coffee in order to continue to buy it. One of the challenges with coffee buying is that exporters usually send a sample of green beans to buyers for them to roast and cup prior to making a purchasing decision (this can also be done at origin). Buyers then decide what quantity to purchase based on this sample. With *roya*, samples can be free of “woodiness” and other defects, but the larger lot can be negatively affected. Who, then, is responsible when the sample does not match the final product, whether because of rust, potato, phenol, or other problems that occur in the long space between harvesting and roasting?

The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, is that it depends. Depending on how the contract is worded, the buyer may take possession of the coffee as soon as it leaves the mill, once it is loaded onto



the container ship, or not until it arrives in the destination port and has been inspected. These buyers may or may not be the roaster for whom the coffee is intended; in order to mitigate their risk and also limit any negative repercussions from their own lack of knowledge about international shipping, many roasters choose to work with coffee import companies to source their beans. The complexity of these relationships and of the work that is required to move coffee across continents is not something apparent in direct-trade or fair-trade models, or even in many of the specialty narratives that trace coffee back to origin. In conversations with buyers, importers, and exporters this complexity is apparent, but like the work done by mills to conform to quality standards and expectations, it is generally not part of the story of coffee as it is told to consumers.

In Costa Rica, where the mills are relatively large and high-tech, coffee is cupped before it is loaded into a container; this is also true in Colombia, but tends to vary elsewhere. The mill in Orosi cups multiple samples from each batch to check for phenol, potato, or other defects (see chapter 4), as well as for woodiness resulting from rust. These scores are recorded and reported to buyers, and in Orosi's case the same company, ECOM, that owns the mill also handles exporting the coffee. ICAFE's checks at the port in Limón are supposed to occasionally include pulling out samples of coffee, roasting them, and cupping them to ensure that coffees have not been switched or mislabeled. Once the container arrives at the destination port, the coffee is usually tested once again to check for damage during shipping. The number of problems that can occur in the movement between mill and final destination are myriad: I have heard stories of improperly dried coffee spontaneously combusting, of mold, theft, customs delays, or the occasional container that disappears off a ship, usually because of improperly latching it down. Thousands of containers disappear like this each year, and the cost of their replacement is born by the shipping company's insurance (and eventually the consumer) and is considered part of the cost of doing business.

It is because coffee can be so easily ruined that this issue of risk is so important. While container ships might be responsible for containers that simply disappear, who is responsible for spontaneous combustion or mold? Who is responsible if the coffee tastes differently when cupped by the roaster in Seattle than it did when he or she cupped it on a farm in Costa Rica, and is there a moral obligation by the buyer to pay for it anyway if it is caused by something like *roya* as opposed to something less heart-wrenching? All of this is negotiated in the contract between buyer and seller, and is one of the reasons that it is so difficult to implement truly direct, fair trade. The logistics of international shipping and warehousing are immensely complex, and rather than sign a contract that puts them on the hook for \$100,000 worth of moldy coffee, many buyers would prefer to pay a little more so that a third party assumes this risk. The same is true for processors and farmers: rather than deal with such logistics or have that responsibility, many would rather a lower reward in exchange for lower risk, and so they hire managers for their cooperatives and send their cherry to mills. Of course, many are not in a position to debate either way, and few small farmers can afford the insurance they should have in case a shipping problem is determined to be their fault. The challenge, of course, for exporters is determining where to look for answers, and blame, when something goes wrong, a particularly difficult task when coffee is aggregated so early as it is in Costa Rica.

In classes offered by the SCAA, potential buyers are exhorted to cup, cup, and cup again and to be very explicit in their contracts. They have access to at least four different classes on the coffee supply chain, using the “C” market, and negotiating contracts, as well as to any number of lawyers and import companies who specialize in these dealings. Small farmers, of course, have access to none of this; while they could in theory sign up for one of the SCAA’s classes without being members, the classes are offered online, in English, during normal U.S. working hours, and the cheapest starts at \$100 for a two-hour course. This same difficulty applies but to an even greater degree when it comes to setting up a cupping laboratory at origin: while roasters and importers take it for granted that they will be able to

test-cup coffee according to SCAA or Cup of Excellence specifications (described in chapter 4), this level of investment and certainty is unavailable to all but a few farmers and the owners of larger *fincas*. Machinery must be calibrated and water purified, temperatures measured and coffee properly stored and roasted prior to cupping. The mills I visited in Costa Rica all had cupping rooms and trained cuppers, but this is not common practice everywhere. Instead farmers and millers must rely on buyers to cup their coffee and offer a score (and thus a price), a practice which is necessarily a conflict of interest. If farmers are never able to cup their coffee, it makes it very difficult for them to see how variation in growing or harvesting methods does or does not affect taste. From their perspective, the process of determining quality, price, and essentially effort all at once occurs in a black box: coffee enters the mill and comes out with a number that can dramatically affect their bottom line – or not, if they do not have access to buyers willing to pay a higher price.

ICAFE requires mills to post the minimum daily price at a visible location inside the office, and the ubiquity of cell phones, newspapers, and literacy means that almost every farmer has access to information about the movement of the market. One of the immediate benefits of the telecommunications *apertura*, or opening, under CAFTA in Costa Rica has been an explosion in the availability of smartphones, with cheap calling, messaging, and internet plans and a drastic reduction in price for non-smart phones. ICAFE has taken advantage of this proliferation to offer information via text message: one can sign up to receive regular informative messages of interest to the coffee sector, from pricing changes to new regulations to updated fertilization or pruning techniques. For those who do not have a cell phone, or who do not wish to receive such messages, ICAFE hosts a regular radio program where employees discuss topics such as plant nutrition, cultivation, quality, and labor; farmers can call in with specific questions. Finally, in addition to the *roya* outbreak app, ICAFE has a Facebook page and Twitter feed, where “fans” can find information about important topics before the Legislature, global coffee news, barista classes, grants, and *roya* control efforts. In contrast, elsewhere in the world farmer

isolation, illiteracy, and the general opacity of “C” market transactions and their effect on price make it very difficult to grow quality coffee, or perhaps more accurately, to be rewarded for that quality (Lotter 2003; Reichman 2011; Wagner 2001; World Coffee Conference (WCC) 2010).

Put another way, conditions for most farmers in Costa Rica are among the best in the world. There is support from ICAFE, support from various government ministries, and the support of the welfare state in the form of health care, social security, and free education. It is in many ways the best possible set of conditions for the people who grow coffee, and it is still beset by problems. In the next two sections, I look at the two extremes of Costa Rican production: Tarrazú, said to have the country’s best coffee, and Hojancha de Guanacaste, which is so far off the coffee-growing map that I did not realize it was even possible to grow coffee there until late in my fieldwork.

### ***San Marcos Tarrazú***

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As a coffee researcher, I am frequently asked by other anthropologists, friends, family, and my students which coffee is the best. My answer is usually, “Whichever one you like best.” In turn, I asked the same question of Costa Ricans. They usually replied with the name of the region where they lived, or where their families had farmed. Coffee professionals, however, whether they were farmers or baristas or employees of ICAFE or an exporter, gave a consistent answer: Tarrazú. Given this, in July of 2013 I headed to Tarrazú for a few days to learn more about the region and understand some of the variation in Costa Rican production.<sup>83</sup> My introduction to San Marcos de Tarrazú, the capital of the *cantón* of Tarrazú, was the result of one of those happy coincidences of fieldwork. I was in Costa Rica for just a few weeks to do follow-up research, and on one of my first days in Orosi I ran into an expat friend in front of the Spanish language school. We stood on the street talking for a few minutes until a woman out for a jog literally ran up to us and started asking questions, in Spanish, about the school.

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<sup>83</sup> Tarrazú is also referred to as Los Santos or Dota. Although Los Santos refers to the broader mountainous region of which Dota and Tarrazú are two *cantons*, with respect to coffee the terms tend to be used interchangeably.

We had a brief conversation and I mentioned that I was from Colorado doing research on coffee. Hearing that, Cristina sprang into action. She and her husband lived part-time in Colorado and part-time in Orosi. She brought me down to their house, sat me down at the counter, offered me cookies and coffee, and asked what I needed. When I explained that I wanted to visit the Tarrazú region, she threw up her hands. “It must be fate!” she exclaimed. “I have a lot of friends up there and I’m sure they will help you.”<sup>84</sup> She pulled out both her cell phone and her land line phone and started dialing numbers, calling one person to get another’s number, starting the second conversation while still on the phone with the first. I finished my coffee and in the middle of this process, which went on for half an hour, she poured me a glass of fresh *cas* juice. By the time she was done I had a place to stay three nights later, interviews scheduled at the cooperative in Santa María de Dota, and her address in Littleton, where I was instructed to come over one day and then take her to Olive Garden for dinner.

Traveling anywhere in Costa Rica by public transportation is an adventure, mainly because as mentioned earlier, outside city centers the roads do not have names or numbers. And though Costa Rica has embraced the smartphone, its buses are run by a seemingly endless number of private companies whose schedules, though known to locals, are not available via the Google Maps trip planner. This information is sometimes available online, but it is rarely to be trusted, as it is likely to be outdated. In this case, however, Cristina’s information about the bus line to Tarrazú was accurate, and I stuck to my time-tested plan of hopping in a cab once I arrived in San José and telling the driver what city I was headed to while specifying that and no, I did not want him to drive me there himself.<sup>85</sup> It turned out that there was a terminal for Tarrazú, and the two and a half hour ride up the mountain would cost me 1980

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<sup>84</sup> Cristina’s promise to help a complete stranger was not surprising. Everywhere I went, strangers or near-strangers were willing to spend time and effort helping me with my research, with no expectation that I would offer anything in return except as someone to listen to their story.

<sup>85</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, this tactic is necessary because there is no central bus terminal in San José, and buses leave from all over the city, sometimes from a small terminal and sometimes from a poorly-marked stop on the street. The stops, particularly the street ones, move around frequently, so that while stops are sometimes marked on Google Maps, they are, like the bus schedules, rarely to be trusted.

*colones*, about \$4.<sup>86</sup> I texted Elisa, Manuel's wife, as instructed to tell her which bus I was taking and what time it would arrive, and she agreed to meet me at the bus stop in San Marcos.

Once in San Marcos, Elisa arrived a few minutes after the bus did and greeted me like an old friend. She had just come from her free English class at INA. INA, the *Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje* or National Learning Institute, offers training in a number of skills useful in the job market, from English to food preparation to tourism management and being a guide. Elisa called Manuel's mother to tell her to tell Manuel that we were ready; Manuel, Elisa explained, was most likely up at his mother's house eating lunch, and he didn't have a cell phone. Manuel appeared only a few minutes later in an old Land Rover, the quintessential Costa Rican coffee farmer vehicle. He, too, greeted me like an old friend and we drove the few minutes up the hill to their house.

By Orosi standards, the house was *humilde*, humble, but beautiful and well-cared for. There was a grassy area in front where Manuel parked, and none of the fencing that Evaristo thought made Orosi houses feel like jails. There were only a few rooms: one for guests, with two sets of rough wood bunk beds, an even rougher room out back where Manuel's brother slept, Manuel and Elisa's bedroom, a dining room, and the kitchen. The walls were covered in newspaper to keep out the drafts, and unlike Orosi houses, which are almost entirely constructed out of concrete, Manuel and Elisa's was mostly wood. The front door did not lock, again a sharp contrast to the triple-locked doors of most Orosi homes. In the dining room there was a beautiful wooden table just slightly smaller than the room itself: it was a gift, Elisa said, from her family, who are all woodworkers. She proudly took me through each room, stopping especially in the bathroom to show me the hot-water shower that they had just recently installed.

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<sup>86</sup> Buses in Costa Rica are unusually cheap considering how expensive everything else is. The price between Orosi and Cartago started at 385 *colones* when I began my fieldwork and eventually rose to 510 before dropping to 495 – just under a dollar for what is usually about a 40 minute ride. The price is set by ARESEP, a national body that regulates the prices of all public goods, including gasoline. Bus companies cannot raise their prices without petitioning ARESEP.

Their home backed onto Manuel's closest fields, and he took me down a path to the homes, in about the same condition as his own, where the migrant workers lived during the harvest. He showed me how he had run electricity out to the compound, and as we walked he cut branches off one tree to replant elsewhere to help with erosion. His lesson about this, repeated many times in many different contexts during my stay, was that the key thing in both coffee and in life is balance and equilibrium. As he dug holes for the tree branches he pointed out the worms that wriggled away. "Worms are a sign of healthy soil. If you use poison [insecticide] it kills them, and they are part of a necessary equilibrium between plants and animals. The whole *fincas* is a system of equilibrium. If you use too much *químico*, chemicals, you kill the equilibrium and then you need more *químico* to bring it back. It's much better to maintain it all yourself on your field, move this tree here, move that one over there." There were so many fruit trees on his fields, he said, that he couldn't possibly eat all they produced; the *peones*, the migrant workers, were allowed to take as much as they wanted. Only a few of the *peones*, he clarified later, were Nicaraguans; Nicaraguans were troublemakers. The majority were indigenous Panamanians and other Costa Ricans from San Vito (on the Panamanian border) and Pérez Zeledón, the major city in the mountains between San Marcos and Panama. The best workers, he said, were the Ticos; others would ask for an advance to buy food and then run off with the money. The Ticos usually came back year after year, and they would never think of cheating him like that.

My three days with Manuel and Elisa were a whirlwind of technical information about growing coffee, the proper ratio of nutrients in the soil, which plants provided which nutrients and which were good for windbreaks or shade, and Manuel's repeated assertion that organic production was *pura pantalla*, a smokescreen: "It is not possible to grow as much [per hectare] as people say they do with organic." Talking with him, with Elisa, and with Manuel's family – his mother's house, it turned out, was a few minutes up the hill from Manuel's, and a few of his ten brothers and sisters lived there, while the others were all nearby – it felt like I had arrived in the Costa Rica that Orosians were so nostalgic for,

right down to the walls so thin you could poke your finger through them and the rich taste of food that had been grown or raised, rather than purchased.

But Manuel was not lost in the past, or satisfied with life in San Marcos or in Costa Rica the way it was. He wanted balance, true, but that did not mean being satisfied with a life he knew could be better. He was involved in a rural community tourism project that was working to bring small groups to the area so they could learn, he said, that Costa Rica wasn't just beaches and monkeys. The project would help families diversify their incomes without turning them into the spectacles of Tamarindo or Monteverde or Manuel Antonio. It was to help with this project that Elisa was so focused on learning English; after she was done with English classes, she planned to take some of the tourism management courses. The project included a number of other farmers and business owners in the Tarrazú region, and after talking with a few of them it became clear that the aim was for as many people as possible to benefit and to have a pricing system fair enough so that Ticos could also come visit as tourists and learn more about their country via hiking, mountain biking, and rafting. By involving locals and inviting Ticos, project member Rafa told me, they would be able to maintain a knowledge of and love for the land that he and Manuel thought was slipping away. It would also keep jobs in the mountains instead of forcing people to move to the cities and "take jobs away from city people."

### **"Have You Ever Seen A Cooperative With Poor Managers?"**

Manuel and the men he introduced me to at the farm store in town were all frustrated with ICAFE and with the government. ICAFE, the men agreed, had its good points, but it was too focused on keeping small farms small with no means to access any of the economies of scale that larger farms had, or the value-add available to processors. They felt that ICAFE's staff, and the larger farms those staff were seen as representing, were only focused on getting rich and leaving the small producer out in the cold – that way there would be less competition. One night Manuel pinpointed the problem with ICAFE and government employees in general. They're too different from small farmers, he said. "Just like the



cooperatives. Have you ever seen a cooperative with poor managers? None of them understand the struggles of the small farmer.” They were too disconnected, and as a result the system was breaking down. When things were more equal, it worked better. There was no future in coffee if it kept going the way it was, not for small farmers and not for Costa Rica more generally.

Unfortunately my interviews with cooperative leadership were canceled at the last minute, and my limited time in Costa Rica did not allow me to reschedule them, so I was unable to hear their side of the story. I spoke with Manuel and several of his friends and family about the cooperatives, but given the limited pool and my limited time in the area, this is a necessarily limited view of the cooperatives’ deficiencies. According to Manuel, the cooperatives – and he was a member of both – had lost sight of what was important for their members, just like the government had. It had worked better when the *junta*, the leadership, was made up of volunteer members: if someone was willing to do the work without getting paid, then they were someone who really wanted the job. But as coffee had professionalized – that is, as it took more oversight to process and ship it and comply with an array of regulations – there was more money to be made as a manager than as a member. CoopeDota and CoopeTarrazú weren’t the worst, because they kept things balanced enough between member benefits and cooperative profits that everyone still came out ahead, but they were on their way. Every year they demanded more and more of farmers, but like with the mill in Orosi, it was nearly impossible for the cooperative to keep the *fincas* separated. As in Orosi, the result was twofold: one, people who spent a lot on chemicals and maintenance earned the same amount as those who hadn’t. Two, there was no way to reward those who brought in higher quality cherries, or to punish those who had a smaller percentage of ripe beans or worse, brought in coffee that had been grown at a lower altitude. The ones who were not honest caused problems for everyone, so the cooperative demanded better quality from everyone in order to overcome the few bad seeds.

Manuel thought people put up with it because Tarrazú's name meant that they earned a higher price than their counterparts at lower elevations, and the differential was significant enough that people could still earn most of their living from coffee. The town of San Marcos sits at about 1350 meters about sea level, but its fields rise up to almost 3,000 meters; as discussed in the third and fourth chapters, this altitude change is enough to earn a significantly better price than in Orosi a thousand feet below. It also explains why the cooperatives were so insistent on farmers handing in better coffee: everyone needed the name to continue to command a higher price, and if too many people brought in floaters or snuck in coffee from lower elevations, everyone would suffer. It was thus the group's responsibility to keep things working for everyone, so that everyone could continue to benefit. It had been easier when he was younger (Manuel was 41) but each year it got harder and harder to keep everyone balanced.

Manuel thought the relative isolation of Tarrazú, compared with Orosi, helped maintain this sense of neighborliness and a group identity that was larger than just the family. In addition, he told me over a giant breakfast of *gallo pinto*<sup>87</sup> that Tarrazú had the best coffee in Costa Rica in part because of its climate and elevation, but mainly because farmers were there still *farmers*. Commuting daily to San José was not an option; Cartago or Pérez Zeledón (San Isidro de El General) were possible, but far from ideal, particularly considering that the San Marcans I spoke with decried the concrete, heat, and anonymity of the city with even greater vigor than their Orosian counterparts. In the mountains, people had to find their own work, and those farmers who were successful at doing so were the ones who listened to their plants, who were out in the fields every day alongside the *peones*.

It was clear from just the few days I spent with him that Manuel was much more of a full-time farmer than almost anyone I had met in Orosi, and that he used the different terrains of his fields to his advantage. As when he had cut the branches along the path to act as windbreaks, he thought about his

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<sup>87</sup> *Gallo pinto* is the Costa Rican national dish of rice and beans, usually topped with eggs and accompanied by bananas and sugary coffee. It is eaten daily for breakfast, particularly in rural areas, and is also an option at lunch and dinner. Not much on eating in the morning, I was only ever able to eat a tiny portion of *pinto*, usually causing Costa Ricans to fear that I was ill. Manuel ate two plates without slowing.

*fincas* as a whole unit. He moved plants from one part of the farm to another, noticed what did better in what area, and tried to limit his chemical use as much as possible. He was successful at keeping his chemical costs low because of his access to, and interest in using, organic materials from other parts of the farm to serve as fertilizer, and because he listened to the soil rather than to the people at the cooperative who were only interested in selling more fertilizer and machines for testing soil composition, rather than selling him the mineral and nutrient mix he needed. An accomplished mechanic, he was able to build and fix most of his own machinery, including the 1970 Land Rover that he proudly told me was still able to make the trip to San José in addition to going up and down the steep, muddy hills in the *cafetal* each day. It didn't look as nice as the cars of his neighbors, but he also wasn't in debt to the banks or the cooperatives, he owned all his land, and it demonstrated to potential customers that he certainly knew what he was doing.

For Manuel and the few other San Marcans I spoke with, the story of coffee was that of the engaged farmer, and it was one that fit well with contemporary specialty narratives. To be a good coffee farmer was to listen to your fields, not to people trying to sell chemicals or measuring equipment. It was to be engaged in the physical landscape as well as within the community and to look for balance in all things. The price one could earn for one's coffee was important, but it was less critical if one was able to minimize costs by maintaining an equilibrium through the manipulation of the natural environment, rather than by introducing chemicals. And it all required that people work together and for the benefit of the community, or the system would fall apart.

Manuel's vision of how to grow good coffee and how to be a good coffee farmer, as well as a good citizen of the community, was echoed with minor variations by Diego in Hojancha and by the farmers I spoke with in Orosi. This is despite the differences in environment and access to government resources between the three regions, and speaks perhaps to the broader Costa Rican values of independence and humility as part of membership in a community that is owed your support.

## ***Hojancha de Guanacaste***

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Hojancha provides such a sharp contrast to Tarrazú that it is sometimes hard to believe they are in the same country. Indeed, the province of Guanacaste, where Hojancha is located, was part of Nicaragua until 1856, and as noted in chapter two, many Costa Ricans in the Central Valley consider it to be only slightly better than Nicaragua itself. In order to visit Hojancha in my limited time frame in 2013, I had rented a car and GPS unit in San José. The trip to Hojancha was not my first time in Guanacaste, but it was my first time seeing the beaches that are often the foreign tourist's only experience with Costa Rica. I had been inland a few years earlier, visiting a friend doing fieldwork in San Vicente, in the district of Nicoya near Santa Cruz, and had come nowhere near the water. Guanacaste is a province that can seem like two different worlds. One world – not that of San Vicente – is that of the beaches on the Nicoya Peninsula, a land mass that sticks out from the Costa Rican mainland like a stiletto heel. The beaches are filled with tourists and expats, surfers looking for the next best wave, and a thriving traffic in recreational drugs. Moving inland from the beaches, across the peninsula and onto the mainland, however, the landscape changes dramatically. It is hot, but drier, with wide plains suitable for cattle – the national image of the *guanacasteco* is not of surfers, but of cowboys. There are few tourists, and the accent changes, the letter *s* dropping off the end of words as it does in Nicaragua. Skin color, too, tends to darken, and indigenous features are far more common than they are to the south and east. Tarrazú had been much like Orosi except colder and a bit more rural: driving to Guanacaste, with its dramatic change in landscape, temperature, and population, it felt like I should have been asked for my passport along the way. Even the green was different, the shading of coffee trees replaced by that of palm trees and other vegetation I could not recognize.

I am not alone in this assessment of Guanacaste's difference in land and people. As noted in chapter two, Guanacaste is treated differently from other provinces in Costa Rica. Choosing to leave Nicaragua and join the country in 1856, it is hailed as a place where people came to their senses and left

Nicaragua's sinking ship (though at the time, Costa Rica was still a backwater and Nicaragua had yet to be mired in the devastation of the Somozas and the U.S. military). Yet for Costa Ricans living in the Central Valley, *guanacastecos* are not that far removed from their former countrymen: upon hearing of my trip, one Orosian friend told me to be careful, that everyone up there was essentially Nicaraguan (and thus dangerous and likely to rob me). In Guanacaste, there is no idea of Costa Rica as a white, homogenous, Central-Valley-focused nation, because the province is none of those things. It is only an inexpensive five-hour trip by bus to Santa Cruz from San José, and the terrain in between is less rugged than that which separates the capital from Tarrazú, but it is enough to keep Guanacaste and its indigenous-descent populations isolated from state social, economic, and political support (Edelman 1992; 1999; Putnam 2002; Stocker 2005).

Despite the province's tourist appeal, much of it remains underdeveloped, and I found myself navigating my rental sedan over a number of dirt roads, as well as paved roads that were so full of potholes it would have been kinder to the suspension if they were allowed to return to dirt. The only paved road to Hojancha is the one heading south from the town of Nicoya. Rather than taking an hour-long detour to find it, I gritted my teeth and sweated my way up the hill, tires slipping on the dirt road as I navigated past washed-out sections that led to steep drop-offs, grateful that it had not rained in several days. Once in town the roads were paved, more or less, and I found my way to the cooperative with little trouble except for the washed-out two-tenths of a mile that separated the cooperative from the main road. That part, at least, I was used to: there was a reason that the Land Rover, and not a low-riding rented Honda Civic, was the preferred vehicle of coffee farmers.

The first clue that I was not in typical coffee country was the heat that hit me as soon as I opened the car door. By definition, Arabica is grown at altitude, so that even in tropical countries like Costa Rica it is always somewhat cool in the fields. In San Marcos it had gotten down to 55 damp degrees indoors at night, and in Orosi daytime temperatures rarely reached 80. Hojancha was hot, and it

was humid, not as much as the beach town I had just left,<sup>88</sup> but more so than any other farm I had visited. The area sits between 600 and 800 meters above sea level, below the 1000 meters I have been told are the minimum necessary to grow Arabica; as a result, almost all the coffee grown there is a varietal known as CR95, a hybrid that is technically Arabica but has been crossed with robusta to allow it to survive the hotter temperatures.<sup>89</sup>

At the cooperative I was met by Diego, one of the managers. He looked to be in his late twenties, and we sat down to talk at one of the tables outside under a pitched roof in a space used for gatherings and meals. If Manuel wanted to know where the poor, or at least not wealthy, cooperative managers were, they were in Hojancha, where it was much more difficult to earn a living in coffee than it was in Tarrazú. Diego's cooperative, Pilangosta, has 170 members and sells conventional, Fair Trade, shade-grown, and organic coffee through a cooperative consortium known as COOCAFE. Coffee, Diego said, had declined since the heyday of the 1990s, when they would receive ten to eleven thousand *fanegas*<sup>90</sup> a year (2,560,000-2,816,000 kilos of cherry yielding 460,000 – 506,000 kilos of green coffee); now, their yearly intake tends to be around six thousand *fanegas* (1,536,000 kilos yielding 276,000 kilos green). It was the price, he said; it had dropped so much that people turned to other industries, namely raising beef cattle and growing cattle feed. Nonetheless, he was hopeful that the cooperative could expand the amount of land under coffee production, which would also be better for the environment than cattle.

Pilangosta was Fair Trade certified, and I asked Diego how that had worked for them. "Fair Trade pays 10,000 *colones* extra per *fanega* (roughly \$20 per 100 pounds or 46 kilos of green coffee) over the

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<sup>88</sup> I had hoped to stay with a family in Hojancha, but was unable to make any arrangements to do so, and the town does not have any hotels. When I asked the desk staff at my hotel in Sámara for directions, they told me it was the first time anyone had ever asked how to get there. It is not listed in Lonely Planet (a kiss of death for tourism in Costa Rica), and I was only able to set up the interview at all through a long chain of friend-of-a-friend requests. That personal touch, however thin, was necessary: I was unable to get anyone at other cooperatives in Guanacaste to return my calls or emails when I contacted them without some sort of intermediary.

<sup>89</sup> Robusta has no altitude requirements, and is frequently found at sea level in hot, humid terrain.

<sup>90</sup> A *fanega* is a measurement of both weight and volume. In cherry form, it weighs 250-260 kilos and a *fanega* of coffee is supposed to produce 46 kilos of green coffee, shelf-stable and ready for export.

regular price. This helps a lot, but a lot of simple<sup>91</sup> people don't understand what Fair Trade is. They don't comply with the requirements because of this (*están en desconforme con los requisitos*). They don't understand why they can't get all the extra money, why it has to stay in the cooperative." The 10,000 *colones* per *fanega* all went to the cooperative as a whole, rather than individual farmers; Diego explained that they used it for maintenance, machinery, and loans. Without it, the cooperative infrastructure, physical and economic, would fall into disrepair, but it was hard to explain this to farmers who saw it as their money (as individuals) rather than the cooperative's money. It was particularly difficult at times when the C price went above the Fair Trade price: though the Fair Trade price is supposed to match the market price, it cannot always respond that quickly, and additionally, payments are made at the end of the harvest. For farmers with cash-flow problems, it made more sense to sell to other buyers outside the cooperative, as they could get cash-in-hand that same day. From a managerial perspective, this was a tremendous challenge, as despite Pilangosta's small scale, it nonetheless had contracts to meet. It was easier in some ways when the price was lower, Diego said, because they knew that people would meet their quotas, and the cooperative always knew where the price would bottom out.

Diego saw the main benefit of Fair Trade as allowing the cooperative to offer diversification and loan programs to their members. For example, the cooperative would buy fertilizer in bulk, and then give it to farmers when they needed it during the year. The cost of the fertilizer would be subtracted from their final payment, with a low interest rate, rather than the farmer needing to pay out of pocket during the lean months. They could also offer loans for larger purchases, at 10-14% interest. Though this rate is high, it is much lower than the typical bank rate of 20-25%, and it did not require farmers to put up their farms or homes as collateral or fill out the reams of paperwork that banks require. Defaults

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<sup>91</sup> The phrase *gente sencilla*, simple people, comes up frequently when talking about agriculturalists in Costa Rica. It usually means people who do not want a lot out of life that they cannot get from their family and their land, and also indicates that they do not have a lot of formal education. It is not an insult, but a recognition of different wants, needs, and backgrounds.

would hurt the cooperative as a whole, but farmers would not lose their main source of income. In general, he thought Fair Trade helped balance out price extremes, and helped keep everything stable. It was better not to risk so much, and perhaps not to earn so much, but to have stability (*hay que agarrar lo que hay y no arriesgar*).

The major problem with coffee, Diego thought, was that no one was willing to pay for quality – not businesses and not individuals, not Ticos and not foreigners (*aquí las empresas no pagan por calidad, ni la gente. El consumidor no quiere pagar lo que debe, sea doméstico o extranjero*). Even though Fair Trade's price helped, it was not enough to drastically change anyone's circumstances in Hojancha; it simply let them keep going. In addition to foreign sales, Pilangosta sold to local supermarkets, but local consumers were often unwilling to pay a price that was higher than Café Rey, the popular national brand that is 90% coffee and 10% sugar. And if people weren't willing to pay, the price wasn't going to go up, and there would be no way to motivate farmers to turn in higher quality coffee when they received the same price no matter what. Farmers would either cut down their coffee, further diminishing the ability of the cooperative to effect change, or they would turn in lower quality, making it difficult to sell the coffee to higher-end buyers willing to pay higher prices than Fair Trade, which does not consider quality as part of its certification.

Hojancha suffered from a lack of opportunities, which is why coffee had continued to be a way of life for their 170 members despite its many challenges. One practice that they had undertaken was to require members to only hire Costa Ricans from Nicoya during the harvest, rather than relying on Panamanian or Nicaraguan migrants. That way, Diego said, at least locals would all share in the benefits, rather than the money going elsewhere. In addition, Pilangosta was, like Manuel and his group in Tarrazú, trying to bring more tourists in to the region, or rather, to bring them up the hill from the beaches. In 2005 they began offering a coffee tour and started selling bags of roasted, pre-ground coffee on the premises. For the first few years, 150-200 people per month had come to take the tour, often as



part of a package from the ocean-side hotels, but since the 2008 crisis had severely curtailed tourism to the peninsula the number was closer to 60. It was hard to get buses up to the town, particularly during the rainy season, and MOPT, the transportation ministry, had yet to come through with promised road improvements.

The cooperative had also explored alternative markets: Asian consumers, Diego said, preferred the area's taste profile (strong, full body, slightly bitter). They would have preferred to cut themselves off entirely from ICAFE's control: ICAFE had very little to offer them in terms of technical assistance, and were always offering excuses when asked for help, but come harvest time suddenly representatives would appear to check on their procedures and treatment of workers. It was like that with everything: the government forgot about Hojancha for the most part, and people were on their own, with only each other to rely on. And because Hojancha had become a town in the relatively recent 1950s, as farmers left Naranjo and Alajuela in search of more land and opportunity further from the increasing density of San José, it did not have the same focus on family as Orosi did. Rather, community had to be the central point of identification, because even though they were Ticos, they were not Ticos in the same way as their counterparts in the Central Valley.

### **Moral Imperatives, Structural Problems**

Its lower altitude automatically, in the logic of specialty coffee, guaranteed Pilangosta's members a lower price than their counterparts in Orosi or Tarrazú, in part because of the need to use the Arabica/robusta CR95 hybrid, which does not have the delicate acidity preferred by many cuppers. The heat, too, affected yields. Plants did not produce as many cherries per tree, and Hojanchan farmers had to plant shade trees more densely than those at higher altitudes. Whereas farmers in the Central Valley told me that they were able to plant around 7,000 trees per hectare, farmers in Hojancha averaged around 5,000. In Hojancha this yielded around 20 *fanegas* of cherry, but those 7,000 trees in Orosi or Tarrazú came closer to 40 *fanegas*, a tremendous difference. Beyond their isolation and lack of

opportunity in other jobs, Hojanchan farmers were thus always at a disadvantage compared to those further south. These were not, however, problems that could be solved by Fair Trade, because they lay outside of the strictly price- and cooperative-focused confines of the certification.

Pilangosta's struggles brought to mind the comment I had heard many times from specialty purveyors who were critics of Fair Trade: that it was charity, and that those who needed Fair Trade to survive should probably be doing something other than growing coffee. This would have the added benefit of taking mediocre coffee out of the market, trimming down some of the oversupply and thus, in theory, raising the price for everyone else. Instead of subsidizing coffee that either should have been sold to the conventional market, rather than as specialty, or not grown at all, consumers would be better off supporting projects that could replace coffee as a source of income.

"But what would that be?" Jorge the taxi driver asked when I returned from my trip and told him about Pilangosta's struggles. "What else can they grow? Sugar cane? You make even less money with sugar than with coffee, and it's harder. There's nothing interesting there for tourists to do. They're too hilly to do much more with cattle, or with other crops, because you couldn't get the machinery up there that you'd need to make it worthwhile. At least they know how to grow coffee, and at least it helps prevent landslides and erosion."

I had no answer for him. Given the challenges that Orosians faced as coffee receded into the background of daily life, I could only hope that Pilangosta continued to find success with Fair Trade, and that as the global recession eased, tourists found their way back up the hill. The state's reach was already thin, and identity was much less strongly tied to the conception of Costa Ricanness as white and *campesino* Costa Rica, so that it seemed unlikely Pilangosta would follow either the path of San Marcos or Orosi in their struggles to make sense of the present and prepare for the future. San Marcos offered proof that at least for now, it was possible to continue growing coffee and to maintain the *campesino* lifestyle and mentality that animated the concept of *pura vida* and national identity more broadly,

though the dissatisfaction Manuel and his friends felt with ICAFE and with cooperative managers indicates that this may not continue much longer.

In the final chapter, I return to Orosi, the town I left ethnographically perched at the edge of the moment of danger at the end of the second chapter. Though the status quo, state employment, and reliance on the family, rather than the municipality, to solve problems had resulted in a middle-class town with educated children, Orosians fear that this life is not sustainable in the neoliberal present. Today, the town faces the challenges of CAFTA, a withdrawing state, and the decline of coffee with little to guide them besides their idealized recollections of the agrarian past. Yet in order to call upon that past its borders must be tightly drawn, with the difficulties whitewashed, elided, or ignored. Without a history of struggle and of making sense of change, Orosians find that the tools that once served them so well are of little use in an increasingly urban and anonymous present.

## Chapter Six: The Ends of Coffee

In July of 2009, the New Economic Foundation declared Costa Rica the happiest country on earth<sup>92</sup> (New Economic Foundation 2009). The story ran on the front page of in *La Nación*, the country's biggest daily newspaper; the United States was ranked 111<sup>th</sup>. For the next few weeks, I asked my Costa Rican friends what they thought about the ranking. María's comment summed up most of the replies:

"If Costa Rica is the happiest country on earth, how miserable must everyone else be?" she asked, while others wondered who the New Economic Foundation had been talking to in order to come to such a conclusion. Happiest country on earth? That was crazy. It was just another case of foreigners seeing only what they wanted to see, presuming that because Costa Rica had monkeys and waterfalls and volcanoes and no army, its people must be ecstatic to live there. A few people speculated to me,



**Image 11: Movistar ad at the airport, October 2011**  
**"The happiest country in the world deserves to be connected."**

<sup>92</sup> The ranking was based on three criteria: life expectancy, carbon footprint, and qualitative surveys with people about their happiness. The United States' ranking of 111 was primarily due to its large carbon footprint. At the time, Costa Rica had just announced its plan to become a carbon-neutral country by 2020.

without offering proof, that in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis that had brought the industry to its knees, ICT had somehow contrived the whole thing to boost international tourism. Of course the designation, particularly once it was repeated in 2012, was marketing gold, and signs referencing Costa Rica's happiness soon appeared in the airport and social media.

No one with whom I spoke thought it accurately represented their daily lives. Instead, for the majority of Ticos I asked about it, the whole thing felt like a joke. Bridges were falling apart, roads had more potholes than asphalt, and then-President Oscar Arias was spending much of his time trying to negotiate an end to the military coup in Honduras rather than dealing with the swine flu, corruption, lack of jobs, and tourism decline that were the other front-page stories of the time. Some people worried that Arias would take the report as a referendum on his presidency and would proceed to do even less to fix the country's problems; after all, if people were already deliriously happy, the government was clearly doing its job.

These complaints appeared in Orosi, too, but there was an additional element to their worries and frustration. In Orosi, people were concerned about *vagabundos*, vagabonds, referring not to homeless people, the town drunks, or even foreign travelers who drifted from place to place, but instead to local teenagers and young adults. The *vagabundos* were seen as aimless, lazy kids who didn't want to work and who wouldn't know how to if a job were handed to them. These kids, people told me, had lost their values. The whole country had lost its values. And this was the happiest place on earth? How was that possible?

In this final chapter I connect the changes in coffee production and state organization to the sense of instability and a perceived loss of values that pervades daily life in Orosi. As both the state and the social framework provided by coffee have receded from daily life, there has been nothing to replace them, so that people are set adrift from their anchoring points. This absence explains some of the nostalgia for the past, for a time when things made sense and the social order was not up for

contestation. There is a strong sense of loss that echoes through that nostalgia: that with all the benefits that the twenty-first century has brought them, something even greater has gone away. The challenge, however, is to bring old ways of talking about belonging and identity into a present that looks quite different from the past. Idealized nostalgia and contemporary notions of belonging are possible because they are tightly circumscribed, eliding undesirables such as Nicaraguans through geographic refiguring. Yet in the evocation of *vagabundos*, such an elision is not possible. They are family members, in one's extended if not always immediate kin group, and as Orosians have turned inwards in their search for stability, they have cast family as the central part in their narratives of belonging. This is hardly unexpected, given the importance of family in coffee production as well as in creating a community where everyone knew each other. However, it does make for difficulty when what one sees as "negative elements" – *vagabundos* – are family members who are not properly performing the values and actions that would grant them full membership. They did not pick coffee so they did not learn how to work hard: the second part of this narrative, that *vagabundos* do not know how to work hard, is publicly decried in order to distance those who know proper behavior from those who do not. The first part – that it comes from not having picked coffee – was not mentioned unless I specifically asked people why they thought the teenagers and young adults of the community were so "lazy" and "spoiled."

### ***"Not A Coffee Life"***

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It is not just parents lamenting the behaviors of young adults who complain about a loss of values and morals that ultimately stems from no longer growing coffee. Buyers, too, invoke the terminology of lifestyles and behavior to explain contemporary problems with producers and production.

*"Ya no viven del café,"* Antonio tells me, using a phrase that is difficult to translate directly into English. The most literal translation of is "no longer do they live of/from the coffee." Antonio intended both meanings. For Orosians, coffee was no longer critical to their economic survival, as it once had

been. In addition, he was saying that their social, familial, and working lives were no longer organized around coffee production and coffee schedules. In essence, he meant that coffee had once been a way of life, in all the meanings of that phrase, and this was no longer the case.

It was August of 2012 and we were sitting in his office at ECOM Trading, one of the multinational corporations that works as a very extensive middleman, helping grow, process, and then move coffee from towns like Orosi to buyers like Starbucks and McDonalds. Technically, Antonio works for CAFINTER, which is owned by ECOM, helping farmers create and maintain business practices that will yield a larger volume of coffee while not polluting the surrounding area. At the time of the interview, the office was on the southeastern outskirts of Cartago, the capital of the province in which Orosi is located. Though Cartago is one of Costa Rica's largest cities and its former capital, the city retains a rural feel to it, due perhaps to the fact that, like Orosi, it is surrounded by lush fields that rise up the hills all sides, except where the green has been bifurcated by the brown of quarries and landslides. Since our conversation, the office moved to Tres Ríos, which sits between Cartago and the capital of San José. And since I began traveling to Costa Rica in 2008 I have watched that area change from coffee fields to empty space to the home of two professional office buildings and a PriceSmart (a members-only discount store, like Costco). The new office, in one of the professional buildings, is air-conditioned and sits next to a very large, upscale mall and rapidly-expanding subdivisions. It is easy to reach the new office by multiple bus routes via roads that were never built to handle the traffic they do today – easy, but usually slow, depending on how bad the traffic is.

ECOM, Antonio told me, had considered pulling out of Orosi completely; as the farmers there no longer lived a “coffee life,” both their quality and productivity had declined in recent years. If their coffee didn't improve soon, if CAFINTER and ECOM couldn't find a way to motivate them, Orosians would have to find a new buyer. Hector, one of ECOM's agronomists, told me later that there was a third possibility: ECOM had started renting coffee fields from owners on a trial basis. Under this

arrangement, ECOM took over the responsibility for replanting, maintenance, and the harvest, but the land still belonged to the owner. Profits, if there were any, would be split between ECOM and the owner, though Hector declined to detail the percentages, or whether costs and losses would also be divided in the same way. The idea was that in this way good coffee land would remain good coffee land (instead of being turned into PriceSmarts<sup>93</sup>) and ECOM would have more control over the coffee chain, both reducing the company's risk and increasing its margins. It would also allow people to keep land in their family, offering a financial investment and a low-stress way to keep non-farming children in touch with their history and heritage.

Rafael, a coffee buyer for ECOM who had spent several years as a trader on Wall Street, was more direct. By the time I interviewed him in June 2013 ECOM had moved to the new office, and the PriceSmart was under construction but not yet completed. Briefly taking his eyes off one of his three computer monitors, which showed coffee's trading activity on the New York Commodities Market in real time, he waved his hand out the window towards the new construction, the tollbooths that sat on the too-small highway, and the houses that crowded the hills beyond. "Why would you stay in coffee?" he asked rhetorically in perfect English. "Why? Do you know how much money you can get selling to developers? Soon there will be no coffee left in the Central Valley. Not in the flat parts, anyway. You can talk about increasing yield and price all you want. There is no way for coffee to compete with the kind of money you can get from selling your land."

"So who will stay in coffee? What will this mean for Costa Rica?" I asked. By that point in my research the content of his comment was no surprise to me, but what *was* surprising was Rafael's lack of emotion about it. Everyone else with whom I had spoken, from baristas to importers to ICAFE employees to farmers and retired farmers, talked about coffee as something that went beyond the

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<sup>93</sup> This is not simply a moral or economic decision. As discussed in the previous chapter, coffee is surprisingly good at limiting erosion and maintaining or improving local biodiversity. Cutting down coffee to build houses or stores or roads therefore has serious environmental repercussions.



ordinary, that required one's whole being and sense of self, that could only been grown with love. They lamented the decline of coffee, using it to account for all of the country's ills, including the alleged laziness of the *vagabundos* in Orosi. Rafael, perhaps due to his years as a trader, had no such sentiment.

"It will change. It has already changed. The people left in coffee will be the ones with land that can't be used for anything else. Or," he added, "the people who hold on to their land thinking the price will keep going up. They are the ones who don't need to earn a living off coffee right now; they can get by with making just a little bit each year, which lets them hold on to it as an investment for their children." This fit in with Antonio's sense that Orosians no longer lived for coffee, and I told him so. "Of course. Why break your back when the price is so low?"

Why indeed? For the vast majority of Orosians who had once been full-time farmers, the answer was that there *was* no reason to break one's back. Better to sell out, or to rent the land, or to let it lie fallow than to work so hard for such little economic reward, particularly when everything else that had made coffee a desirable occupation had disappeared. Their children were educated, and aspired to middle-class careers in offices with stable paychecks and guaranteed benefits rather than the precarity and difficult environmental conditions of coffee. Even if none of this had been the case – even if the price of coffee had remained high – it wasn't what it used to be. Rather than the humble peasant farmer who went out to his fields each day and made his own choices about fertilizers and pruning and replanting, the requirements of specialty production were now such that farmers felt like wage workers instead of their own bosses. To earn so little and then put up with that seemed like much more trouble than it was worth.

### ***To Make Your Own Choices***

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Orosi is only a short distance as the crow flies, but more than three hours by bus down the hill from San Marcos and the Tarrazú region. The case of Orosi coffee production perhaps best demonstrates the challenges faced by coffee growers, buyers, and social justice activists. It has neither

the elevation nor isolation of Tarrazú, nor the isolation and lack of elevation of Hojancha. The town itself, several people told me, is the “Goldilocks” (*Ricitos de Oro*) of Costa Rica: not too close to the capital, nor too far. It is neither too hot nor too cold, too wet nor too dry, too urban nor too rural. It is just right.

As discussed in the second chapter, work and identity in Orosi revolved around coffee for decades, perhaps since the plant’s introduction to the Valley in the 1850s. ICAFE describes the Valley as “both a garden and an orchard, a huge greenhouse where everything you plant turns to gold...a small coffee region...in which most of the conditions required to produce the best coffee on the planet are concentrated in a micro-territory” (Gamboa and ICAFE 2013:135). While no one ever classified coffee farming as “easy,” conditions for production, both social and environmental, were about as good as they could be. The town was small, populated by kin who relied on each other but who could still look to Cartago or San José if the need arose. And when ICE’s hydroelectric plant and dam arrived in the 1960s, Orosians were not only able to diversify their earnings and enjoy government benefits, they were able to make dual claims to Costa Ricanness through their employment in two national industries. Moreover, the colonial church additionally cemented religious belonging and provided the impetus for projects like Orosi Colonial (see chapter two).

If dual employment in coffee and the electric company was working so well, why abandon coffee? This was the question that I initially set out to answer during that first fieldwork period in the summer of 2009. Why had so many people left coffee, when their conversations to me about it were shot through with nostalgia, connections to the land, their family, and their past, and pride in a day’s hard work as an independent farmer? Because people were so proud about their work in coffee, and because they waxed so poetic about what a marvelous occupation it was, it took me years to realize that I was asking the wrong question. The question I should have been asking was, why would anyone *stay* in coffee? It made more sense in Tarrazú, where life was more rural, the cost of living lower, and the price

earned per pound higher, or in Hojancha, where there were few alternatives. But in Orosi, where one could commute to San José on a daily basis, where until 2008 it seemed that the well of tourism income would never run dry, it was a different situation. One of the keys, perhaps, to understanding Orosian nostalgia for the coffee past is that today there is a sense that they did not abandon coffee: coffee abandoned them.

Orosians, because of their fortuitous proximity to San José, had more options than most. Those who did not work for ICE were able to travel to the capital, or to Cartago, commuting rather than moving their families to the cities. Both commuting and working for ICE, however, made it impossible to live the kind of “coffee life” that Antonio envisioned and Manuel embodied. As flexible as ICE was, farmers could only spend a fraction of the time in the fields that they had before. In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, perhaps through the early 1990s, this was not a problem. Coffee standards were relatively low, and the conditions of production were such that Costa Rican coffee was still better than much of what was on the market. Primarily this was due to the care undertaken in harvesting and processing, which ensured that the lowest-quality (e.g., rotten) beans were kept separate from the coffee destined for export. Leaf rust (*roya*) was a minor irritation, as was *broca*, the borer beetles that occasionally infested crops. Doing things the way they had always been done, or even cutting a few corners here and there, still resulted in good-enough coffee.

By the time of my fieldwork, however, good enough was nowhere near enough. I tried, on any number of occasions, to pin down coffee buyers, ICAFE representatives, and mill employees as to what, exactly, farmers needed to be doing that they weren’t. “Farmers need to bring in better quality coffee,” was the only answer I received. But how were they to do that? What weren’t they doing? They weren’t living a coffee life. I felt like I was going around in circles trying to get an answer.

There are some practices that one can point to as making a clear difference in quality, but as discussed in chapter four, these are not always the practices that one would presume would make a

difference. In the midst of the leaf rust crisis, it is apparent that a “coffee life” can have a direct impact on the spread of infestations and plagues. Farmers who are up in their fields every day will notice much more quickly when leaves start to turn red and rot (leaf rust), or when the leaves and cherries are riddled with holes (borer beetles) than those who only come up on the weekends, or briefly in the afternoons. The earlier such problems are spotted, the more easily they can be dealt with, and the less devastating the impact.

As discussed in the last chapter, there is some evidence that leaf rust negatively affects taste, so that farmers who bring in affected cherries are indeed handing in lower-quality coffee. The cherries themselves, once removed from the plant, are indistinguishable from those not affected. At the time of these conversations, however, *roya* was not yet a major concern. *Broca*, too, can clearly lead to lower quality coffee, but unlike *roya*, this is distinguishable almost immediately, as affected cherries have been hollowed out and thus will float to the top of the tank. Farmers whose crops have been heavily affected will therefore have very little of the heavier cherries to offer, instead producing coffee that is destined for the cheaper domestic market.

Apart from external events like *roya* and *broca*, however, it seemed that what industry representatives wanted was some sort of tangible evidence that farmers *cared*. Given that so little of what farmers can do actually affects taste, what sort of interventions were they expected to implement? They could not change the altitude of their fields, the variable that most directly correlates with quality, and certainly their altitude had not changed with the advent of specialty coffee. One possibility was to re-plant aging fields with newer varietals (a practice known as *renovación*, renovation), under the theory that cherries lost some of their flavor when they came from older bushes. Certainly replanting with hardier varietals would reduce the risk of damage from leaf rust, and it would also improve yields per plant and likely the size of the cherries, an important way for farmers to increase their income. Another

possibility was to increase fertilizer usage, or to change up the mix of minerals in fertilizers, but as with *renovación*, there is no quantifiable evidence that this directly contributes to better taste.

Selective harvesting does impact quality more directly, but only if differently ripe cherries are mixed together during processing, the variable that seems to most directly affect taste and which is not a single variable at all. But the conversations I had on both sides of production did not indicate that harvesting was the problem. It would have been a relatively easy scapegoat, given how poorly Nicaraguans are thought of, and given that as migrant workers, they likely have already moved on by the time a farmer's deductions for uneven quality are calculated. Indifference in harvesting can lead to a high percentage of under- and over-ripe cherries, or the inclusion of too many sticks, leaves, or even rocks along with those that are properly ripe. As discussed in previous chapters, it is quite possible to negatively affect taste if these are included with those that are properly ripe, but the mill in Orosi is more than capable of separating out such vagaries.

Improper processing can leave coffee with a moldy or musty flavor. Indirectly, bean size, too, plays a role. When beans are too different in size, they can roast unevenly, which can affect flavor. Mills are rewarded by buyers for sorting beans by size prior to shipment; in Costa Rica, this is done by gravity machines, while countries with lower labor costs, particularly in east Africa, do this by hand. And once beans are in the container, any number of ills can befall them, to say nothing of the complications of roasting and preparation. None of these variables and interventions, however, are the responsibility of the farmer. More than one person has told me that when the coffee leaves the farm, it is the best it can possibly be: all anyone can do after that is to ruin it, or to bring down the quality. So what, exactly, was ECOM, presumably on behalf of its buyers, looking for?

### ***The Performance of Production***

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There are three possibilities as to why no one was able to delineate the specific interventions they wanted farmers to undertake. The first is that there *were* specific interventions that farmers were

told to make, but my interlocutors were unwilling or unable to share them with me. I cannot fully discount this possibility, particularly given that Starbucks is the primary recipient of Orosian coffee. Specialty coffee industry members have told me that Starbucks is “one of those companies” about which it was nearly impossible to obtain information about origin; they went to great lengths, it was said, to make it hard to know the exact origins of their coffee. It would be in keeping with this emphasis on secrecy to not want to share information about techniques or interventions that could be seen as intellectual property. Yet I found no such secrecy in Orosian operations: several mill employees told me directly that most of their coffee was sold to Starbucks, and at least three farmers also told me that Starbucks bought Orosi coffee at a premium price. The sign outside the mill in town displays the ECOM logo, and upon visiting the ECOM website, it is clear within a few clicks of the mouse that they are an intermediary for Starbucks. I could accept that a few rogue farmers and employees shared information about their coffee’s destination that they should not have shared if the mill were not so publicly and directly connected to the company.

The second, and one that I think is more likely than the first, is that harvesting was the problem. The mill was tired of having too little coffee that met its needs, or rather, the needs of its buyers. Farmers that turned in coffee to the *recolectores* would be better able to get away with, intentionally or not, lower standards than those who brought their coffee directly to the mill. Given that as the climate has changed it can now take four or five or even six passes to truly selectively harvest a given area, farmers certainly may have been cutting corners by only hiring workers to go through two or three times, either incentivizing them to pick under- or over-ripe cherries along with the ripe ones, or letting coffee rot on the bush. Either method would result in falling short of export-quality yield expectations, putting the mill in the difficult spot of not being able to meet the needs of buyers. Secrecy or not, this would be a problem for a buyer like Starbucks, which requires a consistent volume of coffee to meet its needs. If a region was no longer able to meet their expectations, it would make sense for a buyer like

Starbucks to pull out entirely, rather than purchase smaller lots that would require them to change their blends. Even though no one mentioned this as a cause, I suspect that increasing indifference to selectivity is at least partly at fault here. As the cost of petroleum inputs (fertilizer, gas for trucks) increases, farmers are operating on slimmer and slimmer margins, and it would be reasonable to try to cut costs by not paying for workers to come back to their field a fourth or fifth time. If the labor of the harvest were still undertaken by family, it would be a different story: not only would family members feel at least some obligation to meet selectivity standards, they could be recruited for multiple passes through the fields.

A third explanation, which does not preclude the other two possibilities, is that what ECOM really wanted was for farmers to better perform farming. The entire logic of specialty coffee is based around the premise of storytelling as traceability: without the ability to pinpoint coffee's origins, to talk about the love and care with which it was grown and processed and prepared, it loses at least some of its differentiation from commodity coffee. The work of the farmer is presumed to inhere in the bean itself in some tangible way, physically changing the coffee's characteristics. It is my contention that this connection between love and work and taste has become such a part of the narrative of specialty coffee that even the millers and buyers cannot keep them separate. That is, although the work of coffee scientists like Shawn Steiman have to date shown almost no connection between farmer intervention and coffee quality (as determined by cupping score), nonetheless the connection itself is presumed to exist. Farmers who do not farm full-time, who do not do the performative work of pulling on rubber boots and white floppy hats and going up into the fields, cannot possibly be doing enough to grow specialty coffee, seen as such a fickle combination of art and science, technology and care. Farmers like Manuel, who was in his fields in Tarrazú every day supervising his paid employees, watching for leaf rust, and repairing his 1970 Land Rover, much better fit the archetype of the *campesino* who works in part for the love of it, and not only because of its monetary compensation. Those who pull on their

boots on the weekends are, in this imaginary, less able to grow great coffee, because they are not living a coffee life.

The irony here is thick, given that so many Orosians told me that a contributing factor to their exit from coffee was that it was no longer about making their own decisions, but about being told what to do by technocrats in offices who cared only about measurements and traceability. Being told what fertilizer to use – and then sold it by a company that would give you a loan, with interest rates below that of banks but still north of 15%, to let you buy it before the harvest money came in – was anathema to those like Jorge, who knew what had to be done to grow good coffee and did not want someone telling him how to do his job. For people like him, whether or not interventions like using particular fertilizers improved quality was less the point than that he felt that millers should stick to milling and let farmers stick to farming. When they did not – when millers and buyers directed farmer efforts – it completely shifted the conditions of work from those of independence and individual knowledge to one that was essentially wage work, where farmers were employees rather than their own bosses. Additionally, having to hire migrant workers during the harvest not only cut into profits (or increased losses), but it amplified this feeling that what had once been the work of nation- and community- and family-building was now just another kind of wage work, and a poorly paid one at that.

To add insult to injury, Orosi farmers did not see themselves as doing an inadequate job, or failing to perform care. I frequently asked people at the end of interviews what they wished people in the United States knew about Costa Rica and/or coffee. Esteban was the most poetic in his answer, but he was far from alone in the sentiment. “Tell them,” he said, “that the reason Costa Rican coffee is the best in the world is because it is grown with love. You can taste the love in the beans. Tell them that.”

### ***The Rise and Fall of the Welfare State***

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At the same time that coffee was declining in importance, and that farmers were beginning to feel a shift in their relationship with the mills, another key component of belonging began to recede: the



state. The welfare state had been refigured during the debt crisis of the 1980s, but it had remained more or less whole, at least from the perspective of Orosi. Moreover, at the time the family and coffee product had still been the bulwark of identity. The town's population had been much smaller than it is today, and tourism had been dominated by domestic tourists looking to spend a day at the hot springs or visiting the church, rather than by the international tourists that began arriving in greater numbers in the mid-1990s.

The town's small size, and relative homogeneity, meant that there was little need to rely on the municipal government to effect change. Most problems were actually family disputes that were solved within the family, and those that could be considered civic – road repair, for example – were often still managed within the family unit. Since families tended to live on the same street or the same neighborhood, interlocutors told me that they would all work together to repair potholes. There was little need to go to the municipal government, located up the hill in Paraíso, except for the issuance of licenses (e.g., for a new business or new construction) or the occasional project that was beyond even the combined efforts of a family to resolve. The majority of resources came directly from the state: medical care, insurance, meal programs at school, grants to build houses, and education. Because the country was so small, both physically and in terms of population, and because state employment had long been a destination for Orosians who did not work in coffee, it felt easy to go to the state for help. Relatives could help navigate bureaucracy, or pull strings, when needed. It made the state feel very close, and very personal, and it made the municipal government in Paraíso feel relatively unnecessary.

With CAFTA, however, this began to change. Although CAFTA was approved in 2007 (see chapter one), its first provisions did not go in effect until January of 2009. And while much was being negotiated at the government level, there were no concrete, visible changes to daily life until the spring of 2011. Prior to 2011, I had not heard anyone talking about CAFTA, or the TLC (*Tratado de Libre Comercio*; Free Trade Agreement), as it is known in Spanish. The closest anyone got to mentioning it was

when Rodrigo, giving me directions to the University of Costa Rica (UCR), told me to get off the bus once I saw “*NO AL TLC*” (No to CAFTA) graffiti. The implication was that UCR professors and students were the only ones who cared about CAFTA, and that they were alone in opposing it. The referendum and the protests and civic mobilization that accompanied it proved that this was not the case, but little of that energy had made its way to Orosi. Besides Rodrigo’s statement, made in July of 2009, no one else had ever mentioned it, or offered an opinion when I brought the topic up in conversation.

There were two events, however, that made it clear that Orosians were anxious about the changes to state and nation that CAFTA would bring. The first occurred in August of 2009, a few months after the first provisions of the agreement went into effect, but before any of those provisions had made themselves felt. The second began in the spring of 2011, when ICE, the much-loved electricity and telecommunications utility, found itself preparing to lose its monopoly status.

### ***¿En Qué Pueblo Estoy Viviendo? Barriers to Social Change***

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When I told other Costa Ricans that I was living and researching in Orosi, they tended to reply with a few common phrases. “Orosi is beautiful,” they might say. Or *es tan tranquilo* – it is very tranquil. Tranquil was the nicer way of phrasing the third reply: *Orosi es tan dormilón*. It is very sleepy/asleep. Depending on the speaker, *tranquilo* could be a positive – the town did not have the stress or problems of city life. Or it could be negative – it was so tranquil that it was asleep, unable to wake up enough to recognize its problems or do something about them.

In the summer of 2009 AyA (*Acueductos y Alcantarillados*), the national water utility, announced that it was going to install meters on every home in the Valley in order to measure water usage. At the time each family was charged a set rate regardless of their use, and the lack of repercussions for high usage under this system led to a lot of waste. Women who lived on unpaved roads would use the hose to water the street in front of their homes, intent on keeping the dust on the road, rather in their houses. Cars were washed religiously each Sunday, the hose left running while children soaped down

each tire. One man washed his horse after he had finished with his car. Amelia, an AyA employee, told me that the waste inside houses was worse, because with a set rate there was no incentive to fix leaking tubes, running toilets, or dripping faucets. Besides, Tapantí National Park, at the south end of the Valley, received seven meters of rain per year. Water shortages in Orosi were not a problem.

Nonetheless, AyA was mandated by law, Amelia said, to put meters on the houses: there was nothing that could be done about it short of going to Congress to get the law repealed. They had already been installed in Cartago, San José, and many of the other Central Valley towns. Despite the apparent intractability of this law, there had been meeting after meeting protesting the meters, complaining about the proposed rates, and accusing AyA employees of all sorts of wild crimes. Amelia thought their anger was misdirected: what people *should* be protesting was AyA's intention to put a new pipeline along the ridge above Orosi. The pipeline was to be a joint project with ICE, and would bring more of Orosi's water to San José and other fast-growing towns in the metropolitan region that could not supply their own water. There was already one tube heading up the hill, but there were still water shortages, so they wanted to build another. She felt that the pipeline had not been sufficiently studied, and that another, smaller pipe was partly responsible for the 2002 landslide that had killed ten people and buried the town in mud for weeks. The pipeline was a project that could and probably should be stopped, that could benefit from locals getting together with local AyA representatives to speak to the government. Yet instead of fighting something that could be proven to be a problem, people were getting up in arms about water meters that would later be shown to have decreased almost everyone's bill. "*En qué pueblo estoy viviendo?*" Amelia asked me incredulously. "*Porque no nos ponemos las pilas?*" (What town am I living in? Why don't we get our act together – literally, "put on the batteries?")

The night before I left in August 2009, there was a three-hour meeting about the water meters. It was held in the *salon parrochial*, a communal meeting room just behind the church. As usual, it was raining, so that it was damp inside the concrete building, and there were nowhere near enough plastic

chairs set up for the overflow crowd. Luckily I had arrived early enough to get a seat next to Sara, who spent much of the meeting translating for me. She did not need to translate the words, but rather, their meaning. I could follow the complaints, but they were so disconnected from the question of whether meters should be installed, what the costs would be, and so on that I felt like what I was hearing could not possibly be Spanish. I had never heard such shouting, so much anger. The meeting stirred up more than 40 years' worth of frustration and local disputes over land ownership, water rights, and concerns with state, local, and corporate ownership of resources. I confirmed later with Sara and several other Orosians that while these frustrations were known, they had gone unspoken until this meeting; she, too, had been surprised by the vitriol. Orosians were so calm, so polite that it was hard to realize that these were the same people we saw every day in town. When someone tried to bring up the indisputable fact that Orosians *did* waste water on a daily basis, and that properly installed meters could help regulate that waste, indeed should drop water rates for those that used less water, their commentary was ignored.

When they were given a chance to speak, AyA representatives fell back on the justification that they were only messengers, that they were state employees like many of those present and could not be held responsible for the state's decisions. They promised, after three hours of shouting, to bring the issue of the *medidores*, the water meters, back to headquarters in San José, and the meeting dispersed with residents cheering their success. Sara, Adrián and I left the meeting together, exhausted and baffled by this display of raw emotion we had just witnessed. We stopped outside the AyA office to talk with one of the employees, Cristian, who had also just come from the meeting.

"Who actually owns the water?" I asked him. The way everyone was talking, it sounded like the water was Orosi's resource, and that both AyA and ICE needed to compensate the town for it. "It belongs to the town of Orosi, doesn't it?"

“No, no, no,” he said. “It belongs to the people here, yes. But the people are the town and the town is the state.” Water was not Orosi’s to have or give away. To Cristian, there was no ideological distinction between the people, the town, and the state, so my question was nonsensical. The people owned the water, but so did the town of Orosi, the *cantón* of Paraíso, the province of Cartago, and the country of Costa Rica. For Cristian, the questions of resource distribution and compensation that had so fired up the town’s residents just a few minutes earlier were unfounded; the social welfare state had long provided medical care, social security, education, and a stable democracy for its residents, and clearly, it would continue to do so forever. But to everyone else I spoke with at the meeting, Cristian’s ideological narrative sounded nice, but failed to acknowledge the reality of the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s that had corporatized much of the social welfare state and begun nationally changing the answer of “who owns these resources?” from “the people” to “the individual” and then “the company.”

Water regulation thus briefly became the flashpoint for local resistance to, and in other forms acceptance of, neoliberal governmentality. That is, the argument against the meters is indicative of both an internalization of neoliberal ideology – resources such as water can belong to individuals – and resistance against it, in that resources such as water should not be available for profit and that fees should only cover the cost of moving the water from the top of the mountains to the houses below in the Valley. Orosians were conflicted over these questions of ownership and property rights, a conflict expressed in the undirected outrage of the water meeting. Their previous ways of belonging to the Valley and to the state had been challenged; AyA employs fewer Orosians than ICE does, but it is nonetheless important to the local economy, and like ICE, a sign of the government’s contract with and for its people. Thus the *medidores* were the first concrete sign that the social contract between the state and its people was up for negotiation. The possibility of putting a price on a resource that has always been almost without cost changed the way Orosians viewed other resources, for if water could become

expensive, what was next? That water costs actually decreased, rather than increasing, did nothing to allay peoples' fears: they merely shifted to other topics. When the Kölbi frog, symbol of ICE's loss of monopoly power, appeared two years later, it would signal that negotiations were over, and not in favor of the people.

"Orosi has always been impossible to organize," Alberto told me one day. He was in his early thirties and held down a professional job in Cartago. I had briefly tutored him in English, and several months later I ran into him on the street after another attending yet another meeting that seemed like it would go nowhere. This one involved the police and their lack of a vehicle, and the only consensus at the end had been that there was a need for the police to have a car.<sup>94</sup> "The church spent two months advertising various groups and when it came time to meet, only sixteen people showed up. No one comes to meetings about first aid and community organizing and escape plans. People got up in arms crazy over the water meters and then nothing happened. They all want someone else to do it and then when something happens they get mad that they didn't know about it or that it wasn't taken care of sooner. When it works out in their favor they forget they were ever mad [as it had with the meters]. There are no cooperatives, no organizations, nothing of any kind here. Cachí [the town across the river] is better organized, they can keep their soccer field neat and clean and ready to play on, Orosi can't even do that. It isn't even that people don't know about things, since obviously people know about things related to the church— they know and they just don't want to go, or they forget, or get busy, or don't care, or who knows what. People are always like this when it comes to getting organized. They get mad (*enojado*) or annoyed (*molestado*) and complain and have a big meeting and everything, and then when it comes time for the second meeting to actually make things happen, no one shows up. They have always been like this."

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<sup>94</sup> They eventually did get a car. It had been donated by the Chinese government through means that remained mysterious to me. It was nearly impossible to find parts for it in Costa Rica, and the owner's manual was in Chinese. The Chinese had also donated a stadium in San José, which ran into similar problems: replacement parts were hard to find and the guides were all written in Chinese.

In a discussion the next day, María, who is roughly the same age as Alberto, said that this is because everyone is always waiting for everyone else to do whatever needs to be done. In their heads, they support what is happening, they all agree that something should be done, but then no one actually wants to do the work. This was what had happened with the meters: committees had been formed, signatures had been taken, but it had all fallen apart rather quickly, and those who had sworn they would rip the meters off their houses had let them be installed without protest. I pressed her on the why. “*Los Ticos somos así*,” she said; that’s just the way we Ticos are. Unsatisfied with this answer, I put forth the idea that maybe people don’t fight for things in Orosi because life is more or less okay and most people have what they need. They have their family, and the church when they need or want it, and clean water and sanitation and a middle-class life. Yes, she said, that seemed to be true. “There isn’t real necessity/need (*necesidad*) here and so there is no pressure to fight to achieve anything better here (*no hay presión de luchar por lograr algo mejor*), because life is pretty good for the most part.”

The strength of the memories of the recent past – its poverty, its thin wood walls, its limited dietary variety – probably contributed to the sense that the status quo was fine just the way it is, so why stir the pot or put forth more effort than necessary? Alex, who sometimes offered coffee tours, and who in an earlier conversation had explicitly connected the problems of Orosi youth to their lack of knowledge about coffee, thought that the problem was that Orosians remained too focused on their families, and did not pay enough attention to the larger struggles taking place. Certainly life in Orosi was pretty good for most people, but they had not had to fight to achieve it. It had been handed to them, first with the fertile soil and then with the fortuitous arrival of ICE and then foreign tourists. Unlike places like Hojancha and San Marcos, there was no need to exert much effort to obtain resources from the state, and even though finding employment was currently a challenge, at least it was possible to live in Orosi and work or study in Cartago and San José.

Orosi's problem, he thought, was that it had spent too long being a land blessed by God, and too long with the family as the focal point of life. "In other places, like in China," he said, "think about the *cangrejos* (crabs) in the *balde* (bucket). One of the crabs gets out, and he figures out how to get the lid off and help the others escape. But here? Here, the one *cangrejo* gets out, he makes sure the lid is back on tight, and then he puts a brick on top of it to be sure." Once, Orosians had done the same for their family members. They would still do the same for family, but the trouble was that family size had decreased with lower birth rates, and the town and the state had expanded so that even one's extended family included only a tiny portion of the country's population as a whole. Self-preservation, or rather family-preservation, had made sense when there was not much room between the family and the state, or between the family and the town as a whole. But now it was detrimental to social organization and the will to change: people had turned inward in response to the challenges of the new millennium, and the way to keep themselves within the circle of belonging was to keep everyone else out.

### ***On The Power of Frogs***

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When I returned for a brief visit in March of 2011, CAFTA was suddenly a topic of everyday conversation, at least in terms of the changes to telecommunications. Many of the components of CAFTA, such as intellectual property rights, copyright law, and tariffs, were still left out of Orosian discourse, but something had clearly changed. There was now a visible, tangible symbol on which to focus fears and worries about CAFTA and what it meant for the state: the Kölbi frog. Kölbi, a word which actually means "frog" in Bribri, one of the indigenous languages still spoken in the southeastern Talamancan area, was the name given to ICE's redesigned mobile phone operation. Until 2011, the only option for cell phones was a contract plan, similar to that popular in the United States, where users were billed each month for their usage. Using less than what was allocated did not earn you any credit, though you would be charged for going over your monthly allotment of minutes, text messages, or data usage. Users could only have one line per person, and the wait to get a number could take months.



Foreigners were not eligible unless they had a *cédula*, an identity card. Numbers were only issued by ICE, and there were few phone models available for sale; the majority were flip phones or first-generation smart phones that barely deserved the name. Service was patchy, slow, and unreliable.

There was, therefore, a great deal of public enthusiasm for anything that could improve this model.

Claro and Movistar, two foreign telecommunications companies out of Spain and Mexico, respectively, were due to begin operations later that year, the first time that anyone besides ICE would be offering such services. ICE had

rolled out Kölbi and its frog ahead of Claro and Movistar's arrival with the goal of demonstrating to customers that the national option was still the best. Indeed, Kölbi's service was greatly improved over the traditional ICE cellular offerings. Now anyone could acquire a number with a copy of their passport or *cédula*, and it took just a few minutes rather than a few months. Pre-paid service (*prepago*) also became available, in which users would recharge (*recargar*) their minutes, texts, and data packages prior to use in increments as low as 100 *colones* (20 U.S. cents). New phones became available; contract (*pospago*) customers were incentivized with similar packages to those available in the United States, in which one could acquire a new phone at a fraction of the retail price if you signed up for a one- or two-year plan.

The Kölbi frog was a massively visible marker that life had changed under CAFTA. Certainly just about everyone (including myself) was pleased with the flexibility of the new system, one of the cheapest in Latin America, but it did not come without a price. The prevalence of cell phones,



**Image 12: The Kölbi frog**  
ICE uses the umlaut, a rare symbol in Spanish, to indicate that the text is part of the Kölbi family. Here, this promotional item can be folded so that it stands up; a 2012 calendar is on the back. I was handed the calendar, a visor, a pencil, an eraser, and a ruler at the Kölbi stand at a national festival in San José.

particularly smart phones, would come to be decried as one of the indicators that young adults had lost their values. More importantly, because ICE was a national utility, tasked with bringing service to even the most remote and unprofitable areas – 98% of Costa Ricans have electricity – it had been tacitly understood as a public good (Mack 2012). With the advent of Kölbi, in Orosi this understanding was less tacit than it was overt, given the importance of ICE employment to the town. Certainly cheaper, more readily available cell phone service was also a public good, but what would be lost when Movistar and Claro arrived? What else could be lost? None of the government agencies were perfect, there was strong agreement on that front, but they were public, and they belonged to the Costa Rican people, and they were an important part of what made Costa Rica different from, and better than, its neighbors. Any profits ICE made were reinvested in infrastructure or new services, all of which kept Costa Ricans employed and ensured that the lights almost never went out.<sup>95</sup> Claro and Movistar had no such commitment to the people, and their profits would certainly not be invested in-country.

Fittingly, many of the debates about telecommunications took place online. A number of Facebook pages appeared at the same time as Kölbi's debut. One is called *Porque amo a mi país defiende al ICE: No a las transnacionales telefónicas* (Because I love my country I defend ICE: No to transnational telephone companies). There is also *Me quedo con el ICE* (I will stay with ICE [rather than switching to Claro or Movistar]), *Grupo Pro ICE*, (Group in favor of ICE), and *El ICE no se vende, el ICE se defiende* (ICE is not for sale, it is to be defended). Images, quotes, rants and statements posted to these Facebook pages by users called for resistance and for Costa Ricans to not stay silent in the face of oppression. One integrated the logos of Claro (a red circle) and Movistar (a green and blue M) to form a grabbing monster that was reaching for a CFL lightbulb wearing an ICE hard hat and holding a banner (styled in the form of religious banners used during processions) with the Kölbi frog. Less political posts enumerated problems faced by Claro and Movistar users in other countries, and urged Costa

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<sup>95</sup> In all the time I spent in Costa Rica, I can only recall one power outage, despite the numerous earthquakes and many strong thunderstorms.

Ricans to stay with their national utility. The Claro and Movistar fan pages, in contrast, had little user interaction and mainly were used to share promotions and the occasional joke in their attempts to connect with followers.

Again, although the majority of Costa Ricans with whom I spoke were happy about their improved cell phone options, the arrival of Kölbi made tangible that which had been only hypothetical for those not involved in the referendum protests. It brought the unspoken source of fear about the water meters – that the state would abandon them as coffee had abandoned them – back to the fore. And because the first tangible sign of CAFTA was connected to ICE, probably the most beloved of all the government institutions, it hit home in Orosi in a way that the previous protests had not. The electricity side of ICE had not officially been affected by CAFTA, but surely that was coming next. Because of its benefits, pay, and proximity to home, working for ICE was a coveted position, and many younger people told me that they wished the older generation would hurry up and retire so that their jobs would become available. In the months following the debut of Kölbi there were a few local calls for ICE to do its part by fixing roads and bridges that were in disrepair or too small for the traffic they now carried. It was time, people said, for ICE and its fellow government institutions to do their part.

Unfortunately, this call to action in Orosi has yet to reach politicians and decision-makers in San José to whom such a cry should have been directed, perhaps due to the claims described above that Orosi has always been “asleep.” CAFTA’s changes had unearthed a wellspring of anxiety and worry about the country’s future, but it had not changed the fundamental structure of the town, which was not given to public or direct action. In contrast, others elsewhere in the country, who had struggled against CAFTA during the 2007 referendum, or who had had decades to get used to the idea that the state was not necessarily equally available to everyone, felt emboldened to act, to call out the government for its inaction (Aguilar Hernández 2009; Chomsky 1996; Edelman 1999; Mora Salas and Pérez Sáinz 2009; Raventós 2008; Rayner 2008; Segura Ballar 2004). During my fieldwork I lost count of

the number of protests, marches, and slow-downs that clogged the capital in the name of one cause or another. San José was not designed to hold anywhere close to the amount of traffic it does now, so it is relatively easy to bring the streets to a standstill. People marched or drove slowly to protest, among other things, potholes, bridges, corruption, ICE's privatization, school teacher pay, the allocation of taxi medallions, Arias's role in mediating the Honduran coup of 2009, and allegations of ties between then-President Laura Chinchilla's administration and drug dealers in Colombia.

In Orosi, by contrast, there were a few blockades of the bridge that led out of town, but for the most part worries over the future manifested themselves in complaints about youth and values, and the attempts at effecting change fell apart due to a lack of social cohesion and trust in one's neighbors – the same things that were upheld as the pinnacle of Orosian and Costa Rican identity. Because the town had not had to fight for its successes (in the sense of needing to organize), there was no framework, no history to draw from to offer lessons on how to deal with these sorts of problems. The past could not offer insights for how to fight a state that had once been unquestionably on your side, even when it was sometimes slow to act.

### ***Kids These Days: Anxiety and Belonging in the Post-CAFTA Era***

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Into the gap that coffee has left behind has stepped...nothing. Nicaraguans, the antithesis of all that Costa Ricans see as good and exceptional, now do the work that was once done by family members. Orosians were caught in a paradox created by their rise to the middle class while trying to maintain a rural, farming-oriented lifestyle. Those in their mid-twenties and older had grown up doing the hard work of coffee farming, and remembered a time before paved roads and foreign tourists and cable TV. They wanted to pass on the values that they had learned during those times to their children, or to their younger brothers and sisters, but without having those children and younger adults actually engage in the work of farming. It made for a great deal of anxiety over their future, the town's future, and the future of youth. Rather than blaming structural forces, such as the drop in coffee prices, government

promises for white-collar work that had yet to materialize, or the complex system of benefits and pay that made businesses unwilling to hire part-time workers, Orosians blamed the youths themselves.

It seems almost a cultural universal that each generation will bemoan the character and struggles (or lack thereof) of the generation that follows them, but it is not my desire to blame Orosians for blaming their children. I am less interested in the veracity of these stories than I am in the way in which they were wielded as narratives of a loss of values, and what this demonstrates about Orosian anxiety more broadly. In casual conversation, whether those in which I partook or those which I overheard on the bus or in the grocery store, “kids these days” were blamed for any number of ills. Mainly it was said that they didn’t want to work hard, that they didn’t know how to work hard, that they only wanted to play video games and ask their parents for money for cell phones. Because they don’t want to work, they spent their days skateboarding in front of the church, or “vagabonding” around town, hanging out on street corners and in front of houses, failing to greet their elders or even to look up from their phones while crossing the street. Those who had truly fallen were said to hang out at the soccer field at night, near the cars that were said to contain drug dealers, who sold pot that had been grown alongside coffee plants.<sup>96</sup>

While drug dealing was not something I wanted to investigate, it was also not the primary cause for concern for my interlocutors. They were more concerned with smaller “crimes,” or at least deviations from what they considered social norms. Many people focused on the danger of the streets: teenagers and young adults, almost all male, were constantly racing up and down the road on bicycles

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<sup>96</sup> I never approached one of these cars to verify this for myself, but I did spend a lot of time in the area at night. One favorite restaurant of mine had a balcony that overlooked the soccer field and the church beyond. From there, it was possible to watch the comings and goings on the street without appearing conspicuous. Some of the cars that parked by the field were unlicensed gypsy cabs, and I came to know both the cars and their drivers. Others looked to me to be engaged in some sort of illicit activity. Drivers would park and roll down their windows. Young men would approach, engage in a brief conversation with the driver, slip something inside the window, and leave, sometimes with a paper bag, sometimes with nothing that I could see. The eyes and gait of the young men who were in the area later at night indicated some kind of intoxication beyond drunkenness. I heard rumors, later verified by a male friend, that one could acquire harder drugs than marijuana at one of the bars: crack and cocaine were both mentioned.

or setting up obstacles to jump on their skateboards. These activities were contrasted by older interlocutors with the “healthy” activities of days gone by: playing jacks and yoyos, walking in the coffee fields, making up games and running around outside. This comparison and complaint is hardly unique to Orosi, but what is interesting here is the general lack of acknowledgement of structural changes that have made it difficult, if not impossible, for youths to engage in the kinds of activities that had been popular as recently as the 1980s.

“What are they supposed to do?” Ignacio asked rhetorically during our interview. He was in his mid-twenties, a college graduate who commuted daily to San José. “There are no parks. There are no teen centers. Their parents don’t want them underfoot at the house, and if they’re dating someone, they definitely don’t want to be at home. There’s no library, no public place to go besides the street, so of course that’s where they go. There used to be dance halls, open fields. Now it’s all fenced in and built up. Plus there’s cable TV, so kids watch that, and they grow up wanting the life you have in the United States.” The town had grown since today’s complainers were young, he noted, and all that open land they were so fond of running around in no longer existed. Ignacio was not alone in his defense of youths: the town today is “boring,” said one man in his early 20s. Parents complained to me about children running them over in the streets while on their skateboards, but acknowledged that there were few alternatives, especially when both parents had to work.

I had tried to protest that life in the United States was not what was depicted on MTV, but the reality was not the important contribution of cable TV: the dream was. “When cable came, in 1997 or 1998, people didn’t really have the conception of brands that they do now,” Sara said. “But cable came at the same time as the Spanish school opened, and suddenly there were these foreigners with Nike swooshes. Kids in Orosi suddenly wanted the swoosh, but they were okay with knockoffs, or with their mothers sewing them in by hand. A few years later they couldn’t have the knockoff, they had to have the original. They wanted what they saw, either on tourists or on TV.” Even more than wanting Nike, or

today, Hollister and iPhones, cable arrived at a time when Orosians were able to afford small luxuries like this for their children, if not entire wardrobes, then at least a hat or a t-shirt. Coffee income, ICE employment, and the slow rise of tourism had all contributed middle-class incomes to what were suddenly middle-class aspirations.

Another complaint I heard, not directly solely at youths, was that Orosi was no longer safe. “You used to be able to walk alone after dark as a woman and not be afraid,” said Martina. “Now there are people here [in town] that I don’t even know,” Roberto told me. Some of them were tourists, in town for a day to see the church and the hot springs, or for a week or more taking Spanish classes, but many of the other faces belonged to Costa Ricans who had moved to town and who had no, or only very distant, local family relations. These people could not be placed in the extensive genealogical reckoning that accompanies any new acquaintance, and therefore, their intentions could not be understood. Besides unknown Costa Ricans and unknowable North American and European tourists, the notion of “strangers” also included Nicaraguans, generally darker-skinned than Ticos, and indigenous Panamanians, also phenotypically distinct and sometimes wearing non-Western clothing, particularly the women. I was frequently warned to watch out for “strangers” during the harvest, when the town filled with migrant workers that locals seemed to pretend not to see.

Another group that was difficult to place were the inhabitants of the *proyectos* that had been built on former coffee fields. *Proyecto* literally means “project,” and is used as it is in English. Though the term has yet to fully embody the negative connotations of “the projects” as they are understood in the United States, *proyectos* are government-subsidized housing projects, only with small concrete houses in place of high-rises. Orosians who do not have homes of their own can apply to live in a *proyecto*, though there is no guarantee they will be placed in one of the projects in and around Orosi. As a result, many of the *proyecto* inhabitants are Costa Ricans from elsewhere in the country; they are poor, and may be from cities, and thus lacking in the skills needed in a semi-rural area. They are also devoid of

their own familial connections, and may be blamed, rightly or wrongly, for crimes where it is not known who the perpetrator was, or where it is desirable to mark the perpetrator(s) as Other.

Orosi, for all that it is depicted, and depicts itself, as idyllic, bucolic, and “the way Costa Rica used to be,” nonetheless does suffer from crime. During my fieldwork there were rumors of a drug runner being shot in the kneecap (unconfirmed), of a number of petty thefts of items left outside (verified, including pet dogs), and of assaults on people walking late at night (also unconfirmed). The Orosi Valle Facebook page seems to constantly warn its followers to be careful near *la cuesta*, the top of the hill that separates Orosi from Paraíso, the municipal seat: bandits are known, the page says, to get cars to stop there, at which point the occupants are robbed, assaulted, and sometimes have their car stolen out from under them.<sup>97</sup> The police force received a lot of scorn: most of the time, its one car was out of service, leaving the police to walk or bicycle to homes that could be miles away. Moreover, the police suffered from severe staffing cuts, and since the law stated that at least one of them had to be physically present in the office at all times, they were known to tell callers that they simply could not send out an officer and the caller would have to wait. Indeed, the security meeting I attended one day focused on what individuals could do to help the police and to protect themselves, rather than the other way around.<sup>98</sup>

The statistical information on Orosi is non-existent, and most surveys capture information at the *cantón* or even provincial level, so that data on towns or even just the Valley itself is difficult to find.<sup>99</sup> I

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<sup>97</sup> In addition to not being near any residences, *la cuesta* also had a tendency to become wrapped in fog so thick it was hard to see more than a few feet in front of you, making it an ideal location for this kind of crime. Continuing the trend of geographically eliding problems, it was also far enough from the center of town so that it was possible to make this a “Paraíso problem” rather than an Orosi problem. I was not able to confirm any of these robberies.

<sup>98</sup> I imagine that part of the increase in metal fencing around homes stems from the inefficacy of the police: now that people have items worth stealing, they need a way to stop others from doing so. Without any kind of reliable policing, it falls on individuals to take their own precautions.

<sup>99</sup> I could not even find a single number for the town’s population: some sources put it at 8,500, while others cited figures up to 13,500 people. I suspect that part of this is due to the conflation of Orosi the town with Orosi the valley, as well as the fact that many smaller hamlets are politically considered to be part of Orosi, even if they are understood locally as quite distinct. Heading south and then back north on the other side of the river from the town of Orosi, one encounters La Anita, Jucó, Río Macho, Purisil, Palomo, and La Alegría. Technically, each town’s



have no way to confirm or deny the allegations of increased violence and theft, though the police representative with whom I spoke was certain that domestic violence had increased in recent years – or at least, formal reports of such violence had increased. But I am less interested in whether or not crime, unemployment, and school attendance can be statistically shown to have increased or decreased and more interested in the way in which the *idea* that these problems have gotten worse seems to now permeate life.

What is interesting in the case of Orosi, and perhaps Costa Rica more broadly, is the form these complaints take. Their unspecified “loss of values” and “laziness,” as well as the wasting of time on skateboards and street corners, are all problems that arose when agriculture ceased to be a primary occupation in town. Instead of heading to the hills after school to help their fathers prune bushes, or, for girls, to their homes to help their mothers in the hours-long process of preparing meals without rice cookers or electric stoves, children are now freed of such domestic responsibility. This was what was supposed to happen, María said, watching her own daughter color in a coloring book. Machines, electricity, freedom from these kinds of chores – this was what we wanted. Getting a washing machine back then, or home internet access today, was a sign that you’d made it. Now we use it to blame our kids for not doing the things we used to do.

One of the bright spots of CAFTA was that it was supposed to bring in more jobs for the increasingly educated young adults that would not or could not return to agriculture. These would be jobs like those available at Intel and Amazon, which had headquarters in Heredia, to the north of San José. These jobs were highly competitive for those who were fluent or near-fluent in English, as were jobs at less prestigious callcenters located in and around Cartago. The hours were bad (often overnight) and interlocutors told me that the pay wasn’t great, but it was better than doing nothing. CAFTA’s

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name includes a “de Orosi” at the end of it, followed by the name of the *cantón*. Jucó’s name, therefore, is “Jucó de Orosi de Paraíso,” even though I never heard it referred to so formally. I had several people tell me that they were “not from Orosi,” though they lived there now, because they had been born in Río Macho – an easy four kilometer walk away.

loosened restrictions on foreign investment and capital were going to increase jobs like these, and put the *vagabundos* to work in offices and retail stores. As of this writing, the sense was that this was like other state promises, such as those to invest in infrastructure: empty. And so the young were twice-burdened: once for failing to embody the values of hard work and clean fun, and once again for demonstrating that the state was no longer living up to its contract with the people.

These young adults also embody the contradiction of Orosian narratives of self and nation that revolve around something that is no longer there. Coffee animates identity, it animates values, it even animates animosity towards Nicaraguans, but it is barely present. It is visible on all the hills, but for one not looking for it, its green can blend in with the green of bananas and shade trees, disappearing because of its ubiquity. Young adults who have never picked coffee cannot understand why their elders would lament its loss: these elders cannot find a way to explain what they are missing.

## ***Conclusions***

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I have argued throughout this dissertation that in Costa Rica, coffee has been a source of pride, of national identity, and of a promise that the state exists for everyone (within the Central Valley) and that it always has and always will provide. The Costa Rican state has failed to live up to this promise, first made in the early days of independence, that it would by design prevent the accumulation of capital by a few on the backs of the many. That this promise was made out of necessity rather than any sort of altruism or essential goodness on the part of leaders was able to be ignored as long as agriculture remained the primary occupation for the majority of the population. With little money trickling into state coffers, and with a polity that was mainly rural, there was little incentive for politicians to break up state monopolies for their own benefit, or to ignore the infrastructural demands of a country that is full of mountains, hills, and either water or the lack thereof. It was with the implementation of CAFTA that the cracks in this promise that began with the structural adjustment of the 1980s widened. Coffee had already been on the decline for years, the price collapses of the late 1980s and early 2000s having taken

their toll on a population that then looked to the service sector or to government employment to find remuneration. While the arrival of competition for ICE's cell phone service was greeted with approbation by Ticos weary of poor service and long waits for new numbers, it also made concrete what had until then been captured only in abstract debates about the country's future. CAFTA promised new jobs, but it also promised that these jobs would not be in government, and that the protections that state workers in particular and all employees in general had enjoyed for decades were unlikely to continue in their current generous form. Neoliberal reform meant that not only would government monopolies be dismantled and the protected economy be opened to foreign investment, but that individual morality and personal responsibility would become, as they have in the United States, precursors to one being deserving of any remaining government benefits. Meanwhile, coffee had already slipped away; now AyA and ICE were under attack just as the world financial crisis began to devastate the tourism industry. No longer could towns like Orosi rely on a "build it and they will come," path of least resistance approach to tourism and employment: tourists and their dollars had to be fought for, and Orosians had no experience with this kind of struggle.

This is not to say that Orosians had no experience with struggle, or that they were willing to sit back and passively let change overtake them. Rather, in the first and second chapters I described the ways in which Costa Rica's long history of isolation as a backwater that nonetheless offered vast tracts of fertile land played out in Orosi. The single narrow entrance to the Valley limited economic development as well as investment in infrastructure, creating a region that remained relatively isolated despite its proximity to the capital. People thus learned to depend on each other in networks that were primarily kin-based, as few outsiders were drawn to a Valley that offered little that was not available elsewhere. Certainly the area's rich soils were a draw, but these were not unique to Orosi. Rather, for Orosians living in "a land blessed by God" meant that it was possible to subsist only on what was grown locally and what could be bought with the meager earnings from coffee. There was little need to travel beyond

Cartago, which was good considering the state of roads at the time. As I explained in chapter two, today Orosians are universally nostalgic for this time, which was described as one of hardship, but shared hardship. There was enough to eat, though it was not widely varied, and roofs over everyone's heads, though the walls holding them up might be thin. Everyone knew everyone, everyone depended on each other, and though any economy that relies on agriculture will by its nature be uncertain, these were uncertainties that were understandable, rooted in the land. Rain or drought might cause a bad crop, but otherwise Orosians knew where they stood.

Change, like the tourists, came to Orosi without anyone fighting for it. ICE's decision to build both a hydroelectric plant and a dam within the Valley in the 1960s created employment with a stable state entity that would completely refigure the town's economic possibilities. In bringing in teachers and building roads, ICE connected Orosi to Cartago and then to San José with roads that also brought new ideas, new people, and new opportunities. Instead of being raised only to follow their parents into gendered roles in agriculture and the home, children were raised with the expectation that they would go to school and enjoy the benefits of the country's increased connectedness to the United States and Europe. Because of its relative flexibility in care, coffee became an extra rather than the only source of cash, and slowly full-time agriculturalists began spending less and less time in the fields. The result was that the crop that was the source of exceptionality, that provided the backdrop for an identity that elided indigenous ancestors and Nicaraguan contemporaries, began to recede from daily life, taking with it the mutual obligation of family members to help one another during the harvest.

At the same time that these changes were taking place in Orosi, the specialty coffee industry was on the rise in the United States, and like the arrival of ICE it, too, would change the way Orosians looked to coffee. They stayed in the same place, but the coffee world changed around them. As chapter three explains, in order to differentiate from the conventional coffees then on the market, specialty purveyors needed to tell a story about coffee, a story of transparency and traceability that was

unavailable to conventional purveyors. While the industry may claim that it has decommodified coffee, what it means is that what is valued is that which does not mimic factory production. The narrative elevates the alleged uniqueness of each bean, each farm, and/or each farmer as a selling point, but one whose value is not purely financial. Rather, particular elements of the labor of production are seen to inhere in the beans themselves, fundamentally changing the coffee's use-value. When each person along the commodity chain does the very best job possible, then and only then is specialty coffee *crafted*; it cannot simply be grown like a carrot, or like conventional coffee, but must be shaped and urged into being. Though on the surface this appears to bring labor to the heart of the discussion, to create direct relationships between consumers and farmers that do not require mediation through an object, instead it is a narrative of elision and concealment that is mirrored by the stories that Orosians tell about their own past. The only way to keep specialty special is to ignore that which does not fit the narrative, and to maintain the coffee itself as the mediator of social relations, reinscribing it with agency so that it is, far from being defetishized, instead hyper-fetished, imbued with powers that are not possible for conventional coffee.

In the fourth chapter I looked specifically at the way in which quality is described, evaluated, and maintained, arguing that to judge specialty coffee is to put a quantitative measurement on a qualitative preference. These preferences change over time as different trends come into fashion, so that what was a fault one year is celebrated the next. In addition, there is a lack of understanding, scientific or experiential, into what interventions lead to changes in taste. The ramifications of this caprice, however, are not simply that coffee snobs thumb their noses at an uneducated proletariat, but that farmers are constantly being asked to make alterations in their methods and performance of care in response to changing industry ideas and ideals about what makes good and great coffee. As I showed throughout the fifth and sixth chapters, despite the fact that purveyors are able to build careers out of coffee sales, farmers are unable to do the same because the price is too low, and the cost of not being

able to make one's own decisions is too high. The narrative of specialty coffee is built on difference, and it remains raced and classed along the lines drawn first by colonialism and then by imperialism.

Specialty coffee came about to provide an alternative to the conventional coffee that aimed for the lowest possible quality consumers would stand at the highest, yet still affordable, price it could charge. It vaulted into prominence in the wake of the pricing chaos left behind by the end of the International Coffee Agreement, promising farmers and consumers alike an improved experience and quality of life. It did not, however, do so evenly, and its emphasis on origin and traceability has had the unfortunate consequence of ignoring local ideas about how to grow coffee and what growing coffee meant for social relations. The sharply different conditions in San Marcos Tarrazú and Hojancha de Guanacaste demonstrate that specialty does not exist outside of history, as much as purveyors attempt to elide those histories in their narratives, or to call upon them in ways that celebrate contemporary efforts at improvement.

I have argued throughout this dissertation that coffee, for all its physical properties, is perhaps best understood in its absence, in what is left unsaid about it. For Orosians, this absence is palpable, an object that was once the center of a knot which has become unraveled. And though coffee is visible from anywhere in town, it is no longer the vibrant focus of daily life it once was. Interlocutors tell me that the lines of trucks filled with workers that rumble through town during the harvest are a pale echo of what they used to be, back when the work was done by family and not by the Nicaraguans who are constantly said to not even exist within town lines. And if, as I wrote at the beginning of this dissertation, Costa Rica *is* coffee, there is so far no sense of what it might be *without* coffee, except bereft of the sense of social responsibility and togetherness that saw it, mythically at least, through the many difficult years that followed independence. While the idea of *pura vida* does not specifically refer to coffee, it certainly references a way of life that is relaxed and slow in comparison with the modern rhythms that are hastened by cell phones, the increasing number of people traveling in private cars as

opposed to buses, by the hundreds of thousands of foreign tourists who race through checking items off their guidebook lists.

The specialty coffee industry, too, for all that it focuses on the properties of coffee, for all that its films and advertising materials linger on coffee farms tucked into mountain valleys, for all that it shows the labor that goes into turning one coffee cherry into one roasted bean, elides much of the story from its carefully crafted narratives. Production and labor, like Orosi's history, are complicated and messy, and both Orosian nostalgia for the past and specialty's love of narrative manage to ignore or downplay anything that would show that messiness. This can range from the more mundane (e.g. logistics and shipping, risk management, customs forms) to the structural (e.g. specialty purveyors can sell coffee for \$7 a cup while farmers earn less than \$1 per pound). It is problematic precisely because the narrative is held up as telling the whole story, as fully pulling back the curtain on production and creating a direct relationship between all the actors in the commodity chain.

*A Film About Coffee*, described as “a love letter to, and meditation on, specialty coffee... [that] examines what it takes, and what it means, for coffee to be defined as ‘specialty’” (Loper 2014), is the most recent example of a narrative that purports to tell the whole story. Despite filming in four countries, it leaves out the kinds of details that I have offered in this dissertation, arguing that it is in these specifics that coffee is made and made sense of. The film is visually stunning, lingering on water as it boils, coffee as it drips, and Rwandan farmers as they pedal heavy loads up dirt roads, but it is precisely this depiction of “coffee porn,” as one interlocutor called it, that specialty's problems are most apparent. *A Film About Coffee* is far from alone in portraying the crafting of specialty as almost unattainably perfect, as the commodity that can change the world. Even the certifications that must engage with inequality do so in a way that reifies individual action and responsibility without acknowledging that conscientious consumption does little to change the rules of the game. Indeed, they rely on that inequality to sell their product, to make consumers feel guilty enough to change the way

they vote with their dollars. The privileging of purchasing power as the solution to the decline of states and long histories of structural inequalities is not unique to specialty coffee, of course, but is part of neoliberal ideologies that focus on individuals, and on highlighting certain individuals as morally worthy of saving while others are not. In the case of specialty, those who are worth saving are those who are seen as laboring out of love and not just for economic gain, who have a connection with their land that is available to consumers through their purchase.

In Orosi, I found that people *wanted* to be *campesinos*, wanted to be farmers, at least in their idealized recollections of what it had meant to be farmers, but their economic success in earlier decades had set them adrift from that occupation and way of life, while not offering the opportunities that such success promised. That this is the case is the tragic irony of specialty coffee as an industry: it focuses on farmers and the means of production in order to sell its coffee and narrate the difference that allows for higher prices on the consumption side, but cannot actually pay farmers the higher price necessary for it to remain a viable occupation alongside government or service-sector work.

The problem with low prices is in part due to coffee's history in the United States, where the presumption is that coffee is a staple that should be priced as cheaply as possible. Although specialty works hard to differentiate itself from this "everyday" notion of coffee, nonetheless it is difficult to convince consumers to pay exponentially higher prices when they have the race-to-the-bottom model of Folgers and Maxwell House against which to compare. Purveyors cannot suddenly raise their prices and expect to stay in business unless all of their competition did so at once, an outcome that is decidedly unlikely in the anti-regulation contemporary era. And as I argued in chapter five the majority of the work, and thus the cost, of getting coffee from bush to barista happens after coffee has left the farmer's control, so that even if prices paid by consumers were to increase, a strictly proportionate division of that increase would result in little making its way back to farmers and harvesters. A different kind of model is needed, but despite the long histories of relative equality and cooperation, at the moment



there is little sense either in Costa Rica or within the industry more broadly that a truly revolutionary movement to make equal all parts of the commodity chain is on its way. If a town like Orosi, where coffee is seen as the source of all that is good and moral and essentially Costa Rican, can experience such a rapid decline in production, how can specialty as it is currently organized be grown anywhere but in areas of precarity and limited choices?

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## Appendix

### Acronyms

AyA	<i>Acueductos y Alcantarillados</i>	Costa Rican Water Institute (Aqueducts and Drains)
CAFTA	TLC; <i>Tratado de Libre Comercio</i>	Central American Free Trade Agreement (technically CAFTA-DR, Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement). Narrowly approved by Costa Rican voters in 2007; first provisions implemented in 2009
ECOM		Multinational corporation that owns the Orosi mill
ICA		International Coffee Agreements, 1962-1989
ICAFE	<i>Instituto Costarricense del Café</i>	Costa Rican Coffee Institute
ICO		International Coffee Organisation
ICE	<i>Instituto Costarricense de la Electricidad</i>	Costa Rican Electricity Institute
ICT	<i>Instituto Costarricense de Turismo</i>	Costa Rican Tourism Institute
INA	<i>Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje</i>	National Learning Institute

### Spanish Terms

<i>Aguinaldo</i>	13 <sup>th</sup> -month payment to employees, calculated by averaging the payment for each of the twelve preceding months. Legally owed to all workers
<i>Apertura</i>	Opening; used to refer to CAFTA “opening” ICE and the telecommunications market to foreign investment
<i>Cafetal</i>	Coffee field
<i>Cafetalero</i>	Coffee farmer; frequently used to refer to a member of the coffee elite
<i>Caficultor</i>	Coffee farmer
<i>Caja</i>	Shorthand for <i>Caja Costarricense de Seguridad Social</i> , or the national health Service
<i>Campesino</i>	Peasant farmer
<i>Cantón</i>	Political division, similar in size and scope to a U.S. county
<i>Caudillismo</i>	Authoritarian populist leadership
<i>Colón/colones</i>	Term for Costa Rica’s currency. During the fieldwork period, the exchange rate was roughly 500 <i>colones</i> to one U.S. dollar
<i>Coyote</i>	Coyote; term used for people who a) smuggle migrants across the U.S. border and b) who buy coffee on the side of the road from desperate farmers and sell it

	to mills
<i>Demoperfectocracia</i>	Demoperfectocracy; once-ironic term for Costa Rica's political system that has passed into contemporary narrative without the layer of irony
<i>Entrega/entregado</i>	Handing in; term used to describe the moment in which coffee passes from the farmer to the mil
<i>Indígena</i>	Indigenous person. <i>Indígena</i> is the polite term; <i>indio</i> is usually insulting, and roughly equivalent to the English term Indian
<i>Mano de obra</i>	Labor (literally "hand of work")
<i>Mestizaje</i>	Result of "mixing" of two races. A child of such a union would be referred to as a <i>mestizo</i> . Not a term that has much salience in Costa Rica
<i>Monte:</i>	Hills or rugged area, often used to refer to coffee fields
<i>Peón</i>	Hired worker; the term can be used disparagingly depending on the context, but is often just a statement of fact
<i>Soda</i>	A small family-owned restaurant with a limited menu
<i>Tico/a</i>	Costa Rican term for Costa Rican

## Coffee Terms

Basket	<i>Cajuela</i>	Term used for the basket into which coffee cherries are picked by harvesters. A <i>cajuela</i> is equal to $\frac{1}{4}$ <i>fanega</i>
Borer beetle	<i>Broca</i>	Pest that bores into coffee cherries, hollowing them out from the inside
Cherry	<i>Cereza</i>	Harvested coffee prior to processing/milling
Collection station	<i>Recolector</i>	Receiving station where farmers can drop off cherry coffee without going to the mill
Cultivar	<i>Cultivar</i>	Variants of a species originating through human influence
Cupper/cupping	<i>Catador/catación</i>	Coffee tasting, a highly regulated process
Dry mill	<i>Beneficio seco</i>	Process of removing cherry that does not require water
Dryer	<i>Guardiola</i>	Large tumblers used to mechanically dry coffee
<i>Fanega</i>	<i>Fanega</i>	Unit of measurement for cherry coffee
Farm	<i>Finca</i>	Usually referring to coffee farm
Green	<i>Verde</i>	Coffee that is ready to roast
Honey	<i>Miel</i>	Sticky layer left on the bean after the pulp or cherry has been removed

Leaf rust ( <i>Hemileia vastatrix</i> )	<i>Roya</i>	Fungus currently plaguing Central American coffee plants
Mill	<i>Beneficio</i>	Where coffee is processed and raw cherry becomes green coffee
Parchment	<i>Pergamino</i>	Coffee that has thin parchment layer, often removed just prior to roasting
Phenol	<i>Fenol</i>	Defect found in coffee that is currently impossible to detect prior to cupping
Variety/variatal	<i>Variedad</i>	Below species in the taxonomic hierarchy, a variety is distinct from other varieties but can hybridize with them. Sometimes used as synonym for cultivar
Wet mill	<i>Beneficio húmedo/beneficio mojado</i>	Process of removing cherry that requires water

## Common Coffee Varietals

From the *Coffee Biology Field Guide* (Bladyka 2013)

Bourbon ( <i>Borbón</i> )	Cherries can be red or yellow, with broader leaves and rounder fruits and seeds than Typica. Susceptible to major diseases and pests
Bourbon Laurina	“Dwarf” bourbon with naturally lower caffeine content; some experiments in progress to further decrease caffeine. Highly susceptible to leaf rust
Castillo	Most common varietal in Colombia; preferred because of its high quality and resistance to leaf rust
Catimor	Result of crosses between Timor and Caturra; distributed since the 1980s. Resistant to leaf rust and berry borers, but not of the highest cup quality. CR 95, the predominant varietal in Hojancha, is a Catimor
Catuai	Developed in Brazil from Mundo Novo and yellow Caturra, released in 1968. Dwarf varietal with red or yellow cherries. Good productivity, average quality, susceptible to major diseases and pests
Caturra	Dwarf mutant of red Bourbon found in Brazil in 1937; very similar to Bourbon in terms of leaf and fruit characteristics as well as susceptibility
<i>Coffea</i>	The “coffee genus” which includes more than 120 species
<i>Coffea arabica</i>	Botanical genus and species name for Arabica coffee. Specialty coffee is predominately Arabica
<i>Coffea eugenioides</i>	Botanical genus and species name for Eugenioides coffee, indigenous to East Africa. One of the two diploid parent plants of <i>C. arabica</i> , with a lower caffeine content
<i>Coffea canephora</i>	Botanical genus and species name for Robusta coffee. One of the two diploid

	parent plants of <i>C. arabica</i> . Originated in sub-Saharan Africa with higher productivity and caffeine content than Arabica. Very few Robusta coffees make the specialty grade
Gesha/Geisha	Wild Ethiopian coffee now popular in Central America, particularly Panama. Named for the town where it originated in Ethiopia, some argue that the spelling was changed because of its delicate nature and/or to appeal to Asian buyers. Highly prized cup profile, but susceptible to leaf rust and has a low yield.
Java	Introduced from Yemen to Java, Indonesia and then to East Africa and Central America. Moderate yield and good resistance to some diseases along with good cup quality.
Mocha/Mokka	Thought to be named for the port of Mocha in Yemen, very similar to Bourbon
Pacamara	Genetically unstable cross between Maragogype and Pacas, developed in El Salvador in the 1980s
Pacas	Dwarf mutation of Bourbon; does well at high elevations but susceptible to diseases and pests
Rubiaceae	Family into which all coffee species are classified; includes more than 13,000 species, mainly woody plants in the wet tropics
Sarchimor	Cross between Villa Sarchí and Timor. Obatá is one of the Sarchimor lines and has good resistance to leaf rust and berry disease, but not always highest cup quality
Typica ( <i>Típica</i> )	General name for a variety of <i>C. arabica</i> varietals, including Blue Mountain, Guatemala, Sumatra, Java, and Kona. Low productivity and high susceptibility to insects and diseases
Villa Sarchí	Found in the town of Sarchí, Costa Rica in the 1950s, it is a dwarf mutation of Bourbon and is susceptible to most pests and diseases