

**Pursuing an “Ethical” Cup of Coffee:  
The Social Production of Equity in the Globalized Coffee Commodity Chain**

(Navigating Relational Ethics from Costa Rican Coffee Production to Bay Area Coffee Consumption)

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Romano: Pursuing an Ethical Cup of Coffee  
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## Preface

*Capitalism is produced and reproduced through everyday actions. My contribution to the study of coffee and capitalism examines how small holder coffee producers are attached to and experience affective ethical behaviors in coffee production and coffee consumption.*

### Doña Arsenia

**Vuelta de Jorco, Valle Central, Costa Rica Journal**

*Excerpt July 19- 20, 2019*

I begin typing as I sip Doña Arsenia's coffee. In this batch, she has performed all phases of the entire coffee production process—from germinating the seed to roasting the final bean—all by hand. This batch is the first for which Doña Arsenia has seen her beans as the final roasted product—liquid coffee. Typically, after harvesting her coffee, she—amongst thousands of other Costa Rican small holder coffee producers—sell their coffee cherries either to *cooperativas* (industrial scale coffee processing mills collectively owned by small holder producers within a community) or to *beneficios* (industrial scale coffee processing mills individually owned by private foreign/domestic companies). These coffee mills operate large infrastructure and processing equipment that separate the exterior skin of a coffee cherry from its internal seed (the coffee bean) through a series of steps in order to transform the coffee fruit into a commodity for export and roasting. Additionally, there are certain farms called *micro beneficios* in which individual producer families own their own processing equipment—on a smaller scale. Most small holder producers, however, cannot afford to individually own the equipment, and thus consequently have no idea where their coffee ends up.

For this particular batch, however, Doña Arsenia needed to provide her own *café oro* (raw coffee—also called “green coffee”) for a coffee roasting class she is taking at the University of Costa Rica. This coffee roasting class is free for her because her son attends the University. Doña Arsenia dreams of roasting her own coffee, but first, she must learn how. Thus, the first step is to produce *café oro*, which requires her to perform all post-harvest steps by herself—tasks usually performed by the *cooperativas*, *beneficios*, or *micro beneficios*. From buying the seeds to digging the terraces, from planting the seeds to cultivating the seeds, from applying fertilizer to pruning the plants, from harvesting the cherries to separating the cherries’ skin from pulp, from fermenting the beans to drying the beans (still surrounded in dried mucilage—the parchment

envelope called *endocarp*) in either the sun or electric tumbler, from milling the beans (to remove the parchment) to sorting through the beans in search for defects, Doña Arsenia finally obtains her *café oro* to bring to class—all of this before she is ready to roast. Doña Arsenia roasts about a dozen 10-ounce batches from her experimental home process. The batches vary in color because she is testing out the different factors involved in roasting, such as time and temperature. Doña Arsenia tries to avoid roasting batches that produce *oscuro* (dark)—almost black, even burnt—coffee, which is the Costa Rican custom, because she knows customers in the “specialty coffee market” prefer lighter roasts. She then brings her roasted beans back to her farm and begins to sort through them in search of defective beans. Defective coffee beans are those that are broken, chipped, or cut, thus, causing a foul, moldy, or fermented taste. The cracks in the beans permit moisture inside which triggers bacterial growth and consequently diminishes the quality of the bean. Doña Arsenia grips a handful of defective beans, claiming “if you are going to sell coffee, it has to be better than this,” but nonetheless, Doña Arsenia finally drinks her own coffee.

## Introduction

*The closer we look at the commodity chain, the more every step—even transportation—can be seen as an arena of culture production....* — Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*

Doña Arsenia displays the tediousness involved in the production of coffee. Where coffee production ends and coffee consumption begins occurs right after “processing” on the visual diagram of the global coffee commodity chain (See Figure 1.) There are roughly 11 steps—from seed to cup—that make up the global coffee commodity chain, and within each step exist more layers of tasks where multitudes of coffee actors perform various roles. For example, the first three steps—growing, harvesting, and processing—represent the sphere of coffee *production*. This sphere represents less than one third of the entire coffee commodity chain, yet, as Doña Arsenia demonstrates, the processes involved are numerous and detailed. If that much activity and technical tediousness exists within the single node representing coffee “processing,” her position as a small holder coffee producer also reveals the array of actors, processes, and struggles that span the entire coffee commodity chain. For example, the dynamics involved in the single step of “growing coffee” might include: implementing various techniques for planting,

combatting fungus and pests, or applying the proper use of fertilizers and pesticides, while the dynamics involved in the step of “coffee harvesting” might include: mitigating climate change that affect coffee cherry maturity, negotiating with migrant workers who help harvest, or devising mechanisms to construct a waged salary for coffee picking, all the while working with the various people the coffee sector employs (See Figure 1). The point is that the global coffee commodity chain is expansive and complex, and each node contains diverse sets of dynamics, actors, skills, and ethical issues—which are all “arenas of cultural production” to consider.



Figure 1. Global Coffee Sector Map (SCA)

However, if we observe the global coffee commodity chain on a macro level, two distinct spheres are visible – production and consumption —revealing seemingly glaring differences, namely socio-economic, between the two. “The disparity between the coffee-growing world and the coffee- consuming world is rooted in 500 years of colonialism. Although no one in *today’s* coffee industry created the existing situation, everyone, including importers, brokers, roasters, retailers, café owners, and consumers, live with this legacy to either perpetuate or to address” (Fishbein & Cycon, 1992).

To ethically address this situation, consumers cannot act without understanding a broad range of economic and social transformations in the history of American capitalism (Roseberry, 1996). The exploration of the “ostensibly intrinsic qualities” of coffee capitalism is where this paper rests (Appel, 2019, p. 3). Thus, before capturing coffee producer profiles and their work-intensive processes as I found them in Costa Rica, it is helpful to understand coffee as the “beverage of United States capitalism” by placing the history of the coffee within two periods of capitalist accumulation: (1) industrial optimization of organization and production, and (2) the identification of specialized market niches (Roseberry, 1996). What is this specialty coffee market? How did it come to be? Who are the social actors of this market? Why should coffee consumers know about the market? How can anthropology address the disparity between production and consumption spheres?

According to the Fairtrade Foundation, the coffee sector supplies a livelihood (of sorts) for some 125 million human beings worldwide (2020). There are the growers, exporters, importers, and roasters. There are the frenzied traders in the wells of the coffee exchanges who set the price of a commodity they rarely see in its raw form. “There are the expert cuppers who spend their days slurping, savoring, and spitting coffee. In the context of our consumer society, how would attention to the realities of them [small holder producers] alter our consumer understanding of their positions, roles, and fates in global coffee capitalism” (Jaffee, 2014)?

This paper contributes to the conversation about capitalism, one that Sylvia Yanagisako advocates for needing to understand how capitalist motives, capitalist selves, and capitalist strategies are produced through the everyday practices and experiences of workers (Yanagisako, 2002). Following Yanagisako, Hannah Appel claims that capitalism is not a context, but rather it is a project. If “capitalism is performative only because of the many means of producing stable repetition which are available to it and which constitute its routine base,” in other words, if “capitalism is constructed,” then this research asks consumer capitalists to think about capitalism through its cultural forms and practices—specifically the culture of specialty coffee in relation to the producers supplying its coffee (Appel, 2019, p. 28). This research sheds light on the ethics produced in the subcultures in the coffee production and consumption spheres by analyzing the evolution of capitalism through the lens of the coffee commodity chain. This paper considers

capitalist markets as historical, economic, and ethical phenomenon by navigating coffee actors' positions and ethical practices.

By weaving through the coffee production sphere and the coffee consumption sphere, this paper offers a glimpse into the terrains of ethically conceived and oriented behaviors that unfold and overlap within each, but rarely between the two spheres. Yet the disparate everyday practices do conjoin since ultimately, producer coffee does fill up our consumer mugs globally and daily. Practices and behaviors that disconnect or mystify producer discourse and realities speak to the relational ethics between the producer sphere and the consumer sphere. Thus, this paper aims "to situate local systems"—within both spheres—in "the wider political and social worlds of which they are apart," or rather the coffee industry (Ortner, 1984, p. 142).

This paper prompts us to think about these questions and issues and to consider how consumption as a mediating form of activism, could help us understand ourselves, and the factors affecting coffee producers, as we engage in the coffee industry. This research enlarges specific experiences of producers and consumers, placing these experiences in the broader spectrum of the global coffee commodity chain (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2019, p. 7). It begins from my position as a coffee researcher interested in coffee consumption and marketing—particularly in the specialty coffee industry—and as a coffee activist interested in the ways these consumption patterns echo and ignore the coffee producers supplying my demand for lattes—particularly the small holder producers of Costa Rica.

## **Part I: Setting the Scene**

### **Chapter 1. Costa Rica: A Nation Born from Coffee**

Coffee was planted in Costa Rica in the late 1700's, and it was the first Central American country to have a fully established coffee industry. For the past 130 years, Costa Rica's valleys of coffee fields have shaped the socioeconomic reality of the men, women, and children who have lived and died in the country. Carmen Kordick concisely recounts Costa Rica's history with coffee in *The Saints of Progress: A History of Coffee, Migration, and Costa Rican National Identity*:

Costa Rica's transition to coffee capitalism is of particular interest because of the critical role that this crop's introduction plays in the way that Costa Rican elites and intellectuals have defined their nation's economic and political development. The narrative holds that

during the colonial period Costa Ricans, who were of “pure” European extraction, forged a peaceful, egalitarian, though impoverished society far away from the colonial centers of power. Capitalism supposedly arrived after independence, with the introduction of coffee in the mid-nineteenth century. In stark contrast, however, to the rest of the isthmus—where coffee capitalism saw rigid colonial-era class and race hierarchies strengthened, Costa Rica allegedly followed a different path. Costa Rica’s colonial position, as an isolated backwater supposedly settled by a homogenous white population, forged a society free of class distinctions, where shared poverty was the norm. Coffee is thus celebrated for establishing a new socioeconomic order based on a large class of thriving small-scale, or yeoman, coffee farmers. In the twentieth century, then, peace, democracy, whiteness, and small-scale coffee production, in combination, are credited for the nation’s relative stability (2-3).

Although Costa Rica contributes less than 1% of the world’s entire coffee production, it has a strong reputation for producing high quality coffee. Coffee has almost become synonymous to Costa Rica for a few reasons. First, Costa Rica is the only country in the world where it is illegal to produce any type of coffee other than 100% Arabica—the highest grade of coffee beans. A law was passed in 1989 prohibiting the planting of other species; it was only in 2018 that this law was lifted.

Second, despite Costa Rica’s relatively small geographic size, the country has eight different coffee growing regions, which differentiates it among other coffee-growing countries through its diversity of profiles. These eight distinct regions, each yielding its own microclimates and unique flavor of coffee include: Valle Occidental, Guanacaste, Tres Ríos, Turrialba, Brunca, Valle Central, Orosi, and Tarrazú (see Figure 2). Tarrazú has been internationally recognized as Costa Rica’s premiere coffee region. Tarrazú has been known for yielding a high percentage of cup of Excellence winners (an annual competition established by the International Coffee Organization to identify the highest quality coffees). The Tarrazú region alone is responsible for attracting many international and specialty coffee buyers.

Third, Costa Rica has a national coffee research institution, Instituto del Café de Costa Rica (ICAFE). ICAFE is designed to assist with the agricultural and commercial development of the Costa Rican coffee market. ICAFE runs experimental coffee crops, studies coffee mutations, and builds a database for coffee producers about soil conditions. Although ICAFE is ideologically apolitical, it is funded through a government-issued export tax of 1.5 percent per every pound of coffee leaving the country—and it handles regulations and licensing of mills, exporters, roasters, and traders, and keeps close record of every sale single coffee contract for each year (Meister, 2017). ICAFE’s export tax contributes to the organization’s seven-million-

dollar budget used for scientific research into coffee varieties, soil and water analysis, and oversight of the national coffee industry, which improves the quality of Costa Rica's coffee (ICAFE, 2020). In recent years, Costa Rican coffee producers have increasingly been interested in using its range of coffee varieties as another way to differentiate itself in the competitive market, appealing to many international coffee buyers.



Figure 2. Costa Rica's Coffee Regions (La Cafegrafía)

The final reason, and perhaps the most enticing for international and specialty coffee buyers, are Costa Rica's *micro beneficios*. These micro coffee mills—have been at the forefront of the processing innovations that have put Costa Rican coffees on the map. *Micro beneficios* are private wet-milling and dry milling facilities that individual producers or groups of small holders build in order to control the processing and separation of their coffees. By investing in processing equipment such as de-pulper machines (machines which remove cherry skin and pulp from the bean), producers can process their coffees in a variety of ways without relying on third-party mills such as *cooperativas* and *beneficios*. Producers who have their own *micro beneficios* (see section 1.3) have more control and agency to experiment in different coffee processing

methods—natural, washed, or honey—which attracts specialty coffee buyers. Micro coffee lots combined with dialed-in processing techniques yield higher quality coffees as well as a more diverse range of technical coffee processes. Micro coffee lots and *micro beneficios* are also traceable, thus enabling international coffee buyers an opportunity to visit the farms of smaller holders in person, as well as advertise this experience for marketing purposes.

### **1.1 Coffee Processing: Natural, Washed, Honey**

In coffee processing, the ultimate goal is to reduce the coffee bean's original moisture content of 60 percent down to 11-13 percent. Natural processing requires only the sunlight and time for the beans to dry. Typically, the beans are spread out on raised wooden platforms, or on concrete slabs. Three times a day, for about 22 consecutive days, the beans must be raked thoroughly to ensure that they dry equally on all sides in order to avoid mold. After this time, the ripe red cherry will have transformed into the browned dry cherry. Natural processing is more tedious and requires more time, but its environment impact is minimal since it does not require any water, as opposed to the washed process.

The washed process is one of the more common approaches and involves the use of a *chancador*—or a coffee de-pulper. This machine contains spiked drums that work by tearing the pulp of the coffee from the seeds (beans), which then fall into a tank. The coffee ferments in these tanks for 18-24 hours to loosen any remaining fruit so the beans can then be thoroughly washed. During this time, the microorganisms in the beans create the enzymes responsible for breaking down the mucilage. The final stage is the drying of the beans. The washed process requires a lot of water. Although this process is quicker than the natural process, this process can threaten the environment. During the wet process, 80 percent of the coffee's volume is left behind as organic waste. The resulting wastewater consists of fermenting sugars from the pulp, mucilage and pectins. Thus, the wastewater is polluted with excessive amounts of acidic nutrients. The run-off from this process creates anaerobic conditions that end up contaminating water supplies for people and animals alike (Cronon, 2020). Additionally, the washed process often requires massive mechanical tumblers to dry the coffee in order to stop its fermentation. Most *cooperativas* and *beneficios* use the washed process. At some *cooperativas*, these drying tumblers require wood. I recall a *cooperativa* in the Guanacaste Region burning through towering stacks of wood.

The honey process is strongly associated with Costa Rica and is perhaps the most desired by specialty coffee buyers for its unique and sweet taste. However, this process is done at *micro beneficios* and it is neither an easy nor a forgiving process. The technique is challenging because it requires keeping a certain percentage of the coffee's fleshy pulp, or "mucilage," on while the coffee dries. Some variations leave 100 percent of the mucilage on the coffee, but each *micro beneficio* utilizes its own unique method. In recent years, subcategories have developed: yellow, red, golden, black, and white honey coffee. According to the Perfect Daily Grind, this subcategorization reflects the ability of the honey process to influence the taste and overall profile of a coffee. It can become a highly scientific process, as the level of mucilage – which influences the sweetness and depth of body of the coffee – is monitored and controlled. Typically, the more mucilage left on the bean, the sweeter the taste (Turp, 2016). The honey process is risky because the beans must first be perfectly ripe prior to drying, and they must continually be moved around to avoid fermentation. Since the mucilage is still on the coffee bean, the chance of mold accumulation is greater. If mold accumulates, the entire batch will be defect-ridden and produce foul tastes. Engaging in honey processing is very risky because producers can lose entire batches of coffee. Many small holder producers (those who are even able to experiment with processing methods) cannot afford to risk losing portions of their coffee harvest, and thus avoid the honey process overall. However, honey processed coffee sells at extremely high prices because of its unique taste.

After each bean has been dried through whichever process—natural, washed, or honey—the coffee has one last step to undergo. The dried parchment must be removed from the bean and the beans must be sorted into uniform size. In the past this task was done by hand, but now there are automated machines such as mechanized hullers. Hullers will separate the beans from this last remaining coating, leaving behind only what is recognized as the coffee bean. With the parchment removed, and the beans sorted, they get bagged for export (Colman, 2018).

## 1.2 Small Holder Coffee Producers

It is difficult to define what a small holder coffee producer is, but the Fairtrade Foundation makes an attempt. It claims that for the majority of the world, small holder coffee producers own less than five hectares of land and earn less than a certain amount per year (depending on the country) in household income. Eighty percent of the world's coffee is produced by 25 million small holder producers (Fairtrade, 2020). In Costa Rica, ICAFE categorizes small holder

producers as owning fewer than 10 hectares of land, and as earning less than \$3000 USD per year. Small holder often means family run, and many production costs are mixed in at the household levels. The majority of Costa Rica's coffee producers are small holders; however, within this pool of small holders there is considerable diversity in how one defines herself/himself, what issues are considered significant to him/her, and how the ethics of labor are practiced. Currently, according to statistics from Global Exchange, in Costa Rica, there are more than 75,000 coffee farmers, of which nearly 40,000 belong to *cooperativas* (LeBrun, 2019). Ninety-two percent of producers are on small plots (<5 hectares), 6 percent are medium-sized lots (between 5-10 hectares), and only 2 percent are on large lots (>20 hectares). However, that number is somewhat misleading, as the number of workers on a farm is different from the number of owners. In total land ownership, small farms constitute 44 percent of coffee producing land, medium farms 21 percent, and large farms 35 percent (LeBrun, 2019).

However, what does being a small holder coffee producer entail beyond quantitative categorizing? Agricultural communities, along with developers, traders, academics, and social enterprises, struggle to define what comprises a “small holder.” Is a small holder someone who owns her own plot of land, one who owns land but doesn’t work it, one who works at the processing mill, a migrant worker who harvests coffee, or one who handles the bookkeeping? At what point and to what degree is someone considered a “coffee producer?” Furthermore, in Costa Rica, men generally do the “farm work,” which includes the sowing of seeds, the spraying of pesticides, the transportation of coffee, etc. Certain coffee organizations report that when they attempt to host community trainings with women coffee producers and their families, many times, the men (usually husbands), dominate the conversations or are the only ones attending the trainings. For this reason, this research specifically targets small holder women and youth and allows *them* to define themselves in whatever way, shape, or form. For example, some women do the bookkeeping for their family’s farm, some are the daughters of producer parents who want to be baristas, and others are independent women who operate their own farms. Any one definition of “small holder” does not exist. The small holders I investigate in this research demonstrate these variances in definitions—some even fall outside the defined categories of a small holder.

### 1.3 Cooperativas, Beneficios, and Micro Beneficios

Typically, small holder coffee is processed in Costa Rica either through the *beneficio* or the *cooperativa*. A *beneficio* is an industrial scale coffee processing mill privately owned by foreign or domestic individuals/companies. *Beneficios* control the means of production because they own the necessary processing equipment to transform a coffee cherry into an exportable coffee bean—either in raw (*café oro*) form or in roasted form. *Beneficios* use their autonomy and private capital to make the coffee production and exportation system work in their favor by deciding the processing method of coffee and negotiating their own prices. On the other hand, coffee cooperatives—*cooperativas*—are localized coffee mills of collective ownership whose power of production and decision-making equally belong to its members. In theory, a *cooperativa* functions as a democracy. *Cooperativas* can sell their members' coffee directly to the domestic or international coffee markets. These buyers range from private coffee companies that include small scale specialty coffee shops to institutions such as universities, and even to giant companies such as Nespresso, Chick-fil-a, and Starbucks. In Costa Rica today, *cooperativas* are responsible for about 40 percent of Costa Rica's coffee production (ICAFE, 2014). According to ICAFE, there are more than 400 registered *cooperativas*, *beneficios*, and *micro beneficios*—although the break down between the three is unclear (ICAFE, 2020).

Relations between small holders and processors have been increasingly regulated, especially through ICAFE. Coffee exports must be logged with ICAFE and priced according to its standards. Although ICAFE tries to be helpful, Doña Arsenia claims that in theory, ICAFE'S rules are obsolete because the organization cannot really know what goes on in the lives of small holders without being on-site to witness and experience coffee producer realities.

Costa Rica has a long history of collective action in the coffee industry, starting in 1903 when farmers first organized themselves to defend their interests against large exporters (Snider et al., 2017). *Cooperativas* began from this moment of activism. Some *cooperativas* have thousands of members and even include retirement pensions, while other *cooperativas* are much smaller and might include only women producers. Overall, Costa Rica's coffee harvest from farms less than 5 hectares are responsible for about 40 percent of the nation's total harvest (Snider et al., 2017; ICAFE, 2014).

*Micro beneficios* are private wet-milling and dry-milling facilities that individual producers or groups of small holders build in order to control the processing and separation of

their coffees. However, most small holder coffee producers do not have the capital to invest in building a *micro beneficio*. *Micro beneficios* in Costa Rica have created models for relationship and direct trade around the world. They attract the type of buyers interested in specialty coffee because micro beneficios enable individual coffee producers to separate quality coffees from more conventional coffees, as well as perform riskier modes of coffee processing. These processes give producers the ability to be individually recognized for their work and quality. However, the distribution of *micro beneficios* throughout Costa Rica is unequal. *Micro beneficios* particularly proliferate in Costa Rica's Tarrazú region. Many global coffee actors and local Costa Ricans associate coffee in Tarrazú with progress and modernity. Because of Tarrazúceño small holders' ownership of *micro beneficios*, they can continually generate greater profits and invest in better processing equipment, build modern homes, and establish connections with international buyers. While many Tarrazú producers enjoy the fruits of modernity, the rest of Costa Rica's coffee regions lack the infrastructure and knowledge to produce high quality coffee (Kordick, 2019, p. xiv). Thus, Costa Rican small holders mainly utilize *cooperativas* and *beneficios*. This distribution of coffee profits widens the socioeconomic division between Tarrazú producers and the rest of Costa Rica's small holders (Kordick, 2019, p. xv).

Furthering socioeconomic divisions among small holders, these *cooperativas*, *beneficios*, and *micro beneficios* are eligible to become Fair Trade or Rainforest Alliance Certified through various, obscure and arguably biased measures, but the implications—both positive and negative—of these certifications are ambiguous and still under investigation. Costa Rica is an important producer of certified coffee and its production of premium -compliant coffee approaches 30 percent of the country's total production (Potts et al., 2017). However, one thing for certain is that the barrier for small holders to become certified is high. For example, achieving Rainforest Alliance certification entails a lengthy online process. Assuming that small holders have access to Internet, a 57-page document sets out the standard requirements that a small holder applicant must comply with before completing an online training. After the online training, the applicant must individually contact an authorized certification auditor who is contracted with Rainforest Alliance. Applicants must then pay for the audit. If their land complies with the criteria for sustainable agriculture—they pay the cost for the certification—if not, they must repeat the process after modifying their land (Rainforest Alliance, 2019).

These certification processes are beyond the reach of many small holders. For instance, many are unable to meet the standards of quality and quantity and lack the financial resources to participate in certification schemes and are thus underrepresented in the studies focused on certification. Certified coffee producers, brands, and *cooperativas* are thus those who already have sufficient capital to invest. On its homepage, Rainforest Alliance asserts that “achieving certification helps farmers reach new markets, negotiate better prices, improve their access to credit, and earn a premium on their beans” (Rainforest Alliance, 2019). Fairtrade International has a similar process. Daniel Jaffee, a researcher on the efficacy of Fair Trade coffee, claims that Fair Trade International began requiring small holder groups to pay their own certification costs, causing certain associations representing small holders in Bolivia to protest, on grounds that the certifier had “lost the essential value of supporting those who are really in need of help” (Jaffee, 2014, p. 227). Research on the efficacy of certification entities comprises an entire separate domain, but a general perception about large certification entities is that they “are business with the goal of profiting from the fair-trade seal” (Jaffee, 2014, p. 227).

Additionally, certification companies imply that they, along with the coffee shops that sell their certified beans, have the well-being of the small holder coffee producer in mind and have connections to the coffee-growing regions. Certified coffee producers and *cooperativas/beneficios* also receive higher prices for their coffee (through premiums) which they can then invest back into their coffee, producing even higher quality coffee. The certification bodies are largely designed to reward the successful. Thus, the cycle continues, and small holders continuously struggle to improve their conditions for increasing farm profitability and to consistently cover the costs of production—all from a disadvantaged standpoint (Montagnon, 2017).

However, as Giovannucci and Ponte (2005) point out and this study confirms, some of the most important benefits of certification are non-financial. Certifications improve record-keeping and management in the *cooperativa*. *Cooperativas*, whether or not they offer direct financial incentives to members, offer many in-kind and indirect benefits related to certification and account for the expenditures of the premium in a transparent manner. An econometric or purely financial analysis of certification does not provide the nuance needed to evaluate the benefits of certification to *cooperativas* and their members.

## 1.4 Coffee: The Giver of Life

Coffee plays a key role in the Costa Rican official national narrative as the celebrated *café oro* – the golden bean—that brought the nation economic wealth. However, this research investigates the conceived meanings and values of coffee that small holders pursue and generate beyond coffee’s economic significance. As the small holders that I spent time with will demonstrate, “coffee is not an exclusively economic venture; rather, coffee’s real value is cultural” (Kordick, 2019). Doña Arsenia would later claim that “*café me da vida*”—coffee gives me life. Julia Gonzalez, another small holder producer from the Valle Central region makes a similar claim:

For me, what I do in life, from my memory of being in the middle of a coffee farm—I am picking coffee, getting up early to go to the *cafetal* [coffee grove], getting my hands dirty with the honey of the coffee, getting bitten by a worm or wasp: coffee is my life. It is my childhood. It is what I have accomplished—that I could go to school, to high school, and also to the university. It is what nourishes me now. The house where I live is maintained thanks to coffee. We eat thanks to coffee; in reality coffee means a lot. Personally, its meaning is more than income. It is what I am. (2019)

Coffee evokes visceral meanings and memories that have been formative the central stages of small holders’ lives. The empirical value of coffee is one that unites Costa Rican small holders. Even youth small holders regard coffee as an important cultural and family symbol. Ricardo Ortiz, a youth small holder from the Valle Occidental region states coffee’s meaning as:

Work, progress, development—it’s something in the blood and in the culture. I learned about coffee little by little through what my family does. You learn to work it. Since I was born, I have worked it [coffee]. (2019)

The small holders in Costa Rica undoubtedly view coffee as an investment that will yield economic returns; however, the qualitative value of coffee and its required labor yield a stronger emotional return in the sense that small holders cannot imagine, nor even desire, to labor elsewhere.

## Chapter 2. Methodology

The minuet of Doña Arsenia hand-processing her coffee showcases the technical aspects of coffee production; however, these technical aspects exclude environmental, political, economic, and social complexities that are equally and forcefully at play in the coffee production sphere. Thus, I allow my interactions with Doña Arsenia and other small holder Costa Rican small holders to introduce such issues and to express sentiments and behaviors that shape, dominate, and re-constitute the production sphere of the global coffee commodity chain. An exploration of these topics humanizes the story of coffee production. The opening scene (see introduction) not only details the production processes, it also introduces the *desire* of producers to be more involved and visible in the totality of coffee production. The subsequent sections sketch out the portraits of particular small holder producers who address similar topics through their day-to-day activities. The following sections also establish the relationship between me, Doña Arsenia, and other small holders. I call these sketches “portraits of the small holders.” In what follows, I account more broadly for my positionality—my history as a student, a consumer, and an intern with an activist non-profit organization. I lay out two sections to guide this research: a specialty coffee and capitalism section to situate the coffee market, and a labor and relational ethics section. I conclude by bridging the *conceptions* of ethics in coffee production with the *perceptions* of ethics in coffee consumption to illuminate the variant and ostensibly disparate practices and behaviors dispersed throughout the coffee commodity chain.

### 2.1 Positionality

How did I wind up in the middle of Costa Rica’s coffee regions on the farm of a woman small holder coffee producer? Often during my Stanford undergraduate years, I frequented a Starbucks off the corner of El Camino located just off campus. I enjoyed escaping campus to study in different environments. Typically, I looked forward to nestling into a cozy corner with my frothy latte surrounded by soft music, warm light, and café décor that dressed the walls with vivid and colorful photos depicting coffee producers in the midst of an abundant harvest with baskets full of plump red coffee cherries—café ambiance. By way of an environmental justice class, I learned about the struggles of small holder coffee producers in Latin America involving stem rust and other environmental problems that threatened their livelihoods and identities as farmers (Catholic Relief Services, 2013). I realized that this threat to livelihood and identity was

produced by environmental factors, but thickened by social and economic factors, and was thus interested in the modes of advertising that cafés engaged in. My eyes flicked back and forth between the idealized and beautified coffee processes portrayed on the wall and the comprehensive menu listings of expensive and indecipherable drinks that hardly seemed to resemble coffee. I was struck by the disconnect between Starbucks idyllic imagery and romantic origin photos that birth these fancy drinks and the working conditions of small holders confronting environmental problems.

What is the position of a consumer in Western society in relation to the small holders who supply the demand for coffee? This question uncovered the webs of interaction among small-holder coffee producers, the US consumers of this coffee, and the intermediaries linking the small holders to the consumers. I became interested in the way specialty coffee shops advertise the livelihoods of small holders in a romanticized way through attractive language, photographic representations, and certification seals. I wondered whether these strategies and representations were indeed accurate or transparent regarding small holder livelihoods or whether marketers only cultivated the idea of intimacy between consumer and small holder in order to govern, glamorize, and profit from the small holders in the Global South.

I hypothesized that small holder coffee producer discourse is impoverished, unheard, unincorporated, and overshadowed by consumer discourse in the context of global communications. I noted the contrasting narratives—the romanticized Starbucks producers and the environmentally impacted Latin American small holders—highlighting what coffee consumers *see* compared to what small holders *experience*. I posited an illusion of the relationship between the coffee-consumer and the coffee-producer mediated by the relations of other actors in between. Through Starbucks, the number one coffee chain in the world, and through other such cafes, millions of consumers are exposed to romanticized narratives. These consumers are significantly disconnected, via such imagery, from the realities and the livelihoods of the small holders that supply their demand for lattes. My research was motivated by the initial questions: Is this representation of small holders “true?” What *does* occur at the production levels of coffee? Is it ethical to portray only romanticized versions of coffee production?

## 2.2 The Consumer Sphere

Propelled by these three questions, I became immersed in the coffee industry, particularly attentive to the ethics of representation among Bay Area consumers. Arguably, US coffee culture

in general and Bay Area specialty coffee culture, are defined as much by the collection of images and narratives that are used in marketing as they are by actual conditions of production. These narratives and images often present idyllic and romanticized livelihoods of small holders. In addition, some coffee marketers now tout “social justice” by producing alternatives to monopolistic trade relationships: Fairtrade, Fair Trade Certified, direct trade, Rainforest Alliance certified, and organic. For example, Fairtrade commonly focuses on the figure of the smallholding peasant producer. The effectiveness of this as a strategy lies in the widespread appeal of masking the exploitative, impersonal, and global market economy in which independent small holders must secure livelihoods (Leutchford, 2008). The focus on these small holder producers may represent a façade to easier consumer buying habits or divert attention away from the issues that small holder producers confront daily. Essentially, specialty coffee sectors often rely on farmers’ personal stories to market their brands.

To the extent that coffee actors in the consumption sphere have been successful in creating styles (creating narratives that convince consumers to perceive what is “desirable” or “quality” in the coffee market), consumers believe that they are drinking coffee from a particular place—or pay no attention to place at all. As Roseberry points out, if people do not know where a product comes from, much less will they “be aware of the processes, or the people, of connection and disconnection in which they are participating. The beverage of U.S. capitalism indeed,” writes Roseberry, alluding to the mystification and overshadowing of small holder discourse and realities (Roseberry, 1996, pg. 773).

There is no widely agreed-upon definition of “consumer,” and the term suggests an array of possibilities; thus, I define the coffee consumption sphere as all those coffee actors involved such as the baristas, micro retailers, café owners, the local roasters. These actors interface with the ultimate consumer—the coffee drinker. Thus, the consumption sphere is composed by groups—macro and micro. The first, all-encompassing macro group involves all those implicated in the coffee industry immediately after the coffee cherry leaves its farm of cultivation—the buyers, traders, sellers, marketers/advertisers, certification bodies, roasters, baristas, and café owners. I refer to these actors as “macro” actors because they can represent international distributors, institutions such as universities, commercial supermarkets, franchise chains such as Starbucks, and hotels. These “macro” coffee actors are responsible for supplying coffee to pools of individual drinkers, or the micro consumers. However, I do not consider these “macro” actors as

consumers because the individuals involved in these roles are making livelihoods and getting compensated for their work. They are “producers” (workers) too in a sense. Thus, I define “consumer” as the coffee drinker—the individual who purchases a bag or a cup of coffee for final consumption.

A local-and consumer-based research context addresses one side of the coin—or one dimension of the coffee commodity chain—however, it is equally important to attend to the commodity chain from the production levels—this case, Latin America. This research aims to address the relational ethics between the small holders, consumers, and those who occupy the spaces in between. However, this research does *not* investigate those actors that link the production sphere to the consumption sphere. This research lacks the perspectives and ethnographic data from coffee actors such as the importers, exporters, distributors, and traders. These actors have an important role and are extremely powerful in the coffee commodity chain, because although they do not own the modes of production nor do they even sell the final cup of coffee, these actors *control* the operation processes and the flow of coffee into global markets. Rather, this research mainly focuses on contact points within the two main spheres: 1) the production sphere, comprised of attitudes of small holders and their interactions with *cooperativas*, and *beneficios*, and with non-profit coffee organizations, and 2) the consumer sphere, comprised of Bay Area roasters, café owners, and baristas—actors situated close to the consumer and thus part of the consumer sphere.

I have wanted to understand how the production and consumption spheres and the subcultures within each both produce “equity”—imagined or not—via verbal imagery idealizing coffee farming production and family businesses. I also wanted to explore the relational ethics between each. I began this research in the coffee production sphere by working for a non-profit organization called Bean Voyage.

### **2.3 Research Approach**

Bean Voyage is a nonprofit organization that co-creates a sustainable coffee chain by eradicating the gender gap in coffee production. Bean Voyage lads community trainings and workshops for small holder women and youth coffee producers in Costa Rica. My role with them had uprooted me from my consumer perch into the production sphere of coffee and presented an opportunity to question certain consumer ethics as they might or might not exist in the production sphere.

Bean Voyage introduced a new frontier of ethics that a non-profit and its network of actors adopt

in their roles in the coffee industry. How I navigated this sphere was influenced by Karen Ho's ethnography, *Liquidated*, particularly her approach to researching using what she calls, "total ethnographies." This approach consists of "interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form; it means collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways [such as] formal interviews, extensive reading of newspapers and official documents, careful attention to popular culture, as well as informal social events outside of the actual corporate office or laboratory" (Ho, 2009, p. 19).

In many ways, my position in studying coffee and capitalism, specifically in Costa Rica through Bean Voyage, was made possible through situations and encounters that involved a broad range of methods, networks, and data sources. These included an internship with an NGO, coffee festivals, interviews with roasters, baristas, small holders, café owners from both consumption and production spheres, participant observation in the coffee fields, site tours of cooperatives, online coffee forums, news, books and academic journals on existing coffee research, and even photographic projecting.

My position with Bean Voyage authorized me to ask questions of small holders and to attend various events and encounters, especially those with women and youth small holder coffee producers. I conducted 7 community visits throughout the various coffee producing regions in Costa Rica, capturing their realities through interviews, photography, and story-writing. My ethnographic data primarily consists of semi-formally structured interviews with two women and two youth small holder coffee producers and members of their immediate and extended families (12 small holders in total), as well as with members of local community coffee organizations. My role consisted of working with small-holder women and youth coffee producers in issues regarding market knowledge, ethics in coffee production and consumption, skill training in coffee topics, and gender empowerment.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, investigating the micro-spheres that small holders occupy reminds me to not limit my research to those who have considerable access to interpretive control over the terrain of meaning and self-representations—the sort of narratives that proliferate in the consumption sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to research the total coffee supply chain, ideally one would research each stop along the coffee chain; however, I do not do this due to the magnitude of such a project. My particular encounters with various small holder coffee producers were invaluable because they provided windows into everyday practices that guide their lives. Their portraits represent a microcosm of the production sphere of coffee.

As Yanagisako states, “[I]t is pivotal to go beyond ‘official’ versions in order to ‘supplement, challenge, and interpret’” their dominant and authoritative discourses with other understandings” (Yanagisako, 2002, p. 29). Thus, like Ho’s method of “total ethnography” I was able to conduct actual fieldwork through the badge of Bean Voyage’s status as a coffee non-profit with access to industry conferences, panel discussions, formal networking events, and informal social events. I document the perspectives from actors who are not so visible or known in the consumption world of coffee—the alternatives to the dominant and official narratives regarding coffee production.

Through Bean Voyage I was able to execute two agenda items which illuminated each other—one, the activist/ social/ community work agenda for Bean Voyage, and the other, my ethics agenda for my anthropological project. These agenda items intersected and complemented each other even though they address different questions. From my initial position rooted solidly in the consumption sphere as I stood in Starbucks, I was then immediately thrust into a more complex positionality as both activist and ethnographer working with Bean Voyage. These separate and opposing positions offered perspectives and experiences from both ends of the coffee chain, with various encounters with the actors in between. I investigate the beginning and end of the coffee commodity chain; however, the ongoing project lies in between. This project aims to rehumanize the coffee industry through the demystification of coffee value supply chain beginning by exploring the ethical transgressions that unfold during production and then, navigating consumer perceptions of the meaning of coffee. This research focuses on the Costa Rican small holders in the production sphere, and it focuses on certain actors belonging in the specialty coffee culture in the consumption sphere.

### **Chapter 3. The Specialty Coffee Culture**

Coffee was one of the first commodities to go from a luxury of the elite class to an everyday necessity of the US middle class. Coffee became the beverage of choice in working and middleclass homes, as well as in factory canteens. The structure of a new coffee market became more industrialized as the role of the coffee traders grew in the emerging processes of standardization and concentration. Consumers were able to observe that the coffee industry was subject to and participant in the same process that made a capitalist world (Roseberry, 1996, p. 770). Coffee became one of the first common products to be tied to a global market (Goodman, 200, p. 116). Coffee consumption quickly became accessible to everyone, whether in the form of

canned Folgers brewed in the home coffee pot, a cheap ninety-nine cent vending machine cup at the 7-11, or a seven-dollar oat milk latte at a coffee shop.

The specialty coffee industry is considered a niche in the larger coffee industry, or in other words, it is a “subculture” of both coffee and capitalism (Roseberry, 1989, p. 27). The specialty coffee industry can be viewed as a “subculture” in and of itself in the consumption sphere, but also as a something that produces “subcultures” in both production and consumption spheres because it creates pockets of “niche economies in each, all neatly circumscribed phenomena, which are thick with meaning” (Roseberry, 1989, p. 31). These “subcultures, far from being reducible to a closed system of signs and relations, are meaningful worlds—always fluid and ambiguous, and partially integrated with mosaics of narratives, images, and signifying practices” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2019, p. 31). Viewing the specialty coffee industry as a subculture in and of itself as well as a producer of subcultures we can grasp the constitution of complex social fields created from unique values and histories in both production and consumption spheres (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2019, p. 14).

In the consumption sphere, coffee caters to every social class. Variations of new coffees yield more choices, more diversity, new capitalism, and more capitalism: “coffee has become the beverage of post-modernism” (Roseberry, 1996, p. 763). This transformation and proliferation in coffee consumption created new opportunities for entrepreneurs and companies to offer coffee’s pleasure in many ways: namely, the idea of *specialty coffee* shop or the selling of “gourmet” coffee varieties, to cater to a more affluent crowd willing to spend a little bit more for these coffee experiences (Roseberry, 1996, p. 763). Thus, the ambiances and experiences of the specialty coffee industry seemingly cater only to the coffee drinkers. Additionally, the specialty coffee industry is regarded as a more lucrative and traceable industry at its production levels because coffee’s supply chain genealogy encompasses small holder coffee producers that can be located and individualized. For example, a small holder knows that her commodity will most likely be a cup of coffee that sells in some sort of coffee-related place, more so than a sugar cane producer knows what product her sugar cane will turn into. Coffee is easier to trace and is more transparent in that sense, which is why small holders themselves can also be utilized as marketing assets in the specialty coffee market. The incorporation of producers as significant actors in the coffee commodity chain creates both positive and negative implications, which the specialty coffee industry exemplifies.

In the globalized market, coffee is growing in demand and as an industry. Specialty coffee, also referred to as “third wave coffee,” is an emerging culture of consumption where consumers realize that the quality and price behind a cup of coffee is not just the result of an expert barista, but rather it begins in the coffee field itself. Actors are becoming more attuned to the nuances involved in coffee’s development, which affects the quality of the coffee, and consequently the price paid for it. For example, at first glance, coffee beans appear the same. They have the same size, color, flavor, aroma; however, coffee beans are actually very different. They arise from various country origins, and they come in an array of specie varieties. Coffee individuals, particularly those from the Global North consuming countries, are engaging with coffee at extreme technical levels. Some features they are especially attentive to include the coffee’s flavor notes (anywhere from chocolately-carmel to hazelnut-prune undertones), the elevation at which the coffee grew, the fermentation methods of the bean, the engineering of coffee brewing equipment, the gradient of the coffee roast color, the price of certain coffee varieties per pound, all driven by the individual specialty coffee drinkers’ preferences.

The specialty coffee industry also generated a new era of coffee brewing. It is seeing a whole range of actors. Home drinkers and retail drinkers have engaged in a full-fledged scientology of coffee brewing. Attention and research into the freshness of beans supplied by the local roasters, the art of latte making, the coarseness of the coffee grounds, the temperature of the water, the sleek barista equipment, the lab instruments for various coffee brewing techniques, the mastery of milk textures, and many more elements of specialty coffee have grown exponentially in the form of books, podcasts, conventions, coffee associations, online data bases, workshops, and even as universities courses.

The specialty coffee industry strives to account for every detail represented in each market niche along the way—from the moment the coffee bean was plucked off the bush to the moment it manifests in a latte. Thus, as new developments and trends expanded in the specialty coffee industry, so did attention to the ethical practices towards the ways in which the gourmet coffees were sourced—an attempt towards an all-inclusive circle. However, this attention was not evenly dispersed throughout the coffee consumption sphere, but rather it was initially sought out by the critical middlemen who were the roasters that could develop special relationships with importers willing to deal their coffee in smaller lots. The roasters in turn would supply a network of specialty cafes with “sustainable” and “direct-trade” labeled coffee (Roseberry, 1996). Now,

with the popular demand for specialty and freshly roasted coffee, these specialty cafes are increasingly becoming the roasters themselves and are seeking out relational ties with small holders at their origin.

Without doubt, the experiences with coffee are changing. Coffee now tastes better than previously mass-marketed coffees, offers pleasure in many ways, and inspires inquiry into its production processes (Roseberry, 1996, p. 762). These new engagements with coffee have forged a new niche within the capitalist market economy—which is, namely, the specialty coffee market.

### **3.1 New Actors, New Institutions, New Focuses**

The coffee industry, in particular the Bay Area coffee scene on which I focus, is accumulating dense concentrations of specialty traders, roasters, retailers, café owners, and customers. Focusing on the retail niche of the specialty coffee industry creates a sort of hierarchy of control—considering that the cafe roasters, retailers, and advertisers convey the narratives and shape the knowledge behind the coffee that they select to serve—and ultimately sell—to customers who represent the final coffee drinkers at the end of the coffee commodity chain. What does specialty coffee marketing and selling involve and who shapes the small holders' narratives?

Broadly, there are four main ways in which specialty coffee production is advertised to coffee drinkers: the first directs no attention towards the lives of the individuals who produced the coffee but rather to the geographic profiles of where the coffee bean came from and the physical and sensorial properties of the coffee itself—in other words, the marketing of coffee is solely based on its quality; the second promotes that idea that the coffee was produced and sourced in a “sustainable,” “environmental,” “producer-conscious,” and “transparent” way—in other words, the marketing of coffee is based on the ethical components encouraging care for the environment and awareness of the lives of the small holder coffee producers; the third advertises the same exact concepts as explained in the second; however, it does so in a dishonest and nontransparent way—in other words, the marketing of coffee is based on tactics of false narratives that enforce their ostensibly “responsible,” “mindful,” and “compassionate” character to heighten their image in the eyes of a conscientious consumer; and the fourth embodies a stewardship approach that seeks to channel more capital back to the small holders—in other words, the marketing and consumption of coffee is attempting to transform markets to benefit the

disadvantaged members of a commodity industry by demystifying the coffee supply value chain to as many consumers as possible.

The educational component in the marketing and selling of specialty coffee initially began by setting out what “quality” technically signifies in the specialty coffee industry. “Quality” refers to method and taste such as intricate brewing methods and sophisticated flavor profiles; however, now education also includes the knowledge of “sustainable” and “ethical” practices and relationships involved in coffee sourcing and production. This sort of “mindful” education has filtered down from the coffee traders to the coffee drinkers. Specialty coffee shops—which are much smaller in size than franchise coffee shops—can highlight the connection to individual farmers in a way that large coffee companies cannot. Specialty coffee shops are in better position to advertise “ethically sourced” or “fair trade” coffee. Whether the sourcing is “ethical” is another research matter.

Many specialty cafes and specialty coffee associations began “educational” seminars to cultivate more detailed knowledge about coffee among retailers, expecting that they in turn would educate their customers (Roseberry, 1996, p. 755). Individuals who have had the opportunity to explore the primary knowledge about the basics of coffee production, processing, sourcing, and marketing through origin visits and personal research strongly advise new coffee entrepreneurs that “historic” and “geographic” background is an essential element to comprehensive knowledge of coffee (Roseberry, 1996, p. 755). Many specialty coffee drinkers and cafe owners express interest in gaining a fuller understanding of the totalizing industry of the global coffee commodity chain, but they acknowledge that their experience and perspective is limited by time, capital, connections, and other more pressing obligations. Thus, the knowledge of the situational context and historical processes about their own coffee in the specialty coffee industry is a feasible place to begin.

The presence of select consumer actors seasoned in experiences and situated in positions embedded in the historical perspective of the specialty coffee industry reflects new sets of social, political, and ethical concerns that would have been “anathema to earlier generations of ‘coffee men’” and even to consumer generations that are still developing today (Roseberry, 1996, p. 755). Consequently, the historical and contemporary knowledge of coffee and the impact of its circulation account for the shift in market trends and the introduction of ideas, practices, and teachings about “ethical consumption” that should be included in the specialty coffee industry. If

we consider Roseberry's claim within the context of our consumer society, "how would attention to the presence of [producers] alter our consumer understanding of their positions, roles, and fates in Latin American economies?" Specifically, this research positions consumers and other actors involved in the coffee industry to think about the relationship between capitalism and ethics through their cultural forms—the culture of specialty coffee.

## Chapter 4. "Ethics" Framework

An exploration of ethics will be the primary conduit for investigating the various ways labor, practices, and behaviors are dispersed throughout the coffee commodity chain—from coffee small holder to coffee drinker. Since the coffee industry is comprised of actors who exert forms of labor that grant them some sort of livelihood, — the producers, retailers, roasters, baristas, traders, café owners, as distinguished from micro consumers, i.e., the individual drinkers— this exploration of ethics focuses on the ethics of labor. Ethics represent the dimension that seems most under-defined but also highly-contested as it applies to various aspects in life—including how one values labor. It seems that all individuals conceive of some idea of what labor represents to and for them; however, these ethical positions are flexible and contextual. If small holder producers and other coffee actors engage in certain forms of labor—a *production* ethics—then coffee *drinkers* can only *perceive* what those various forms of labor involved in coffee production are, along with the ethics that follow. Alternatively, coffee drinkers engage in a sort of consumption ethics.

There is no way that small holders, individual drinkers, and all those coffee actors in between will come to common conclusions on ethics—they cannot. Each actor can only perceive what ethics, particularly labor ethics, means from each of the various spectrums within the coffee commodity chain. It is reductive to sort through ethics from one perspective; thus, it is vital to capture many ethical lenses, even those that do not appear to claim ethical ground. We need to understand—if only at least to some degree—what small holders, individual drinkers, and the actors interlinking them are doing, what motivates them as actors in the capitalist coffee system, and how it all fits together—because it does all fit together in a messy, transnational, transcultural, unjust, obscure, and relational market system. The neoliberal market is a massive market, and commodities have a central role. The global commodity chain is a totalizing system in which—for better or worse—everyone is incorporated (Li, 2014). The coffee industry also

involves a web of commodities, social relations, competition, profit, exchange, and market disparities—a microcosm of capitalism. There is coffee in our supermarkets, in our cafes, in our mugs, but this coffee does not abstractly come into existence. There are agents involved in coffee’s manifestation, and the study of labor ethics contributes to making each actor’s social realities less abstract. Thus, I treat small holder, and coffee actor labor ethics not only as individual, but also as relational, ethical landscapes.

The discourse on the conceptions of “labor” and the “ethics of labor” in the coffee commodity industry needs to be explored and expanded. Ethics are slippery to define and discuss since small holders, intermediary coffee actors, and drinkers have their own ideas and experiences involving labor and the ethics they ascribe to it. This investigation of labor ethics demonstrates that critical labor theories of capitalism and capitalist relations cannot adequately grasp essential features of the coffee commodity chain, nor, I argue, the new formations and categories of “modern labor” (Postone, 2003, p. 4; Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 6-7). The way that small holders and coffee actors come to know themselves and find meaning in their labor—the ethics of their labor—is not compatible with a traditional Marxian theory of production between producer, consumer, and capitalist.

My research demonstrates that small holders and the coffee actors (the buyers, traders, sellers, marketers/advertisers, certification bodies, roasters, baristas, and business/caf  owners) who create livelihoods through coffee—all conceive of a “labor ethics.” Both groups’ conceptions of ethics contain some sort of labor-related aspect to it; yet their ethics do not involve the same categories nor issues. I first explore *conceptions* of ethics as experienced by small holders. I sort through my data using a narrow lens—scrutinizing, then going to the stories for support or evidence of how I came to understand labor ethics through the lenses *conceived* by the small holders. What small holders narrate regarding their experiences as a coffee laborer governs my sense of what counts as ethical issues.

I then shift the focus to the individual drinkers who do not generate livelihoods through coffee in the specialty coffee culture and investigate their *perceptions* of ethics regarding coffee production. This research demonstrates how individual drinkers and actors in the consumption sphere may *conceive* of their own consumption ethics through their purchasing power by utilizing their autonomous choice regarding the coffee that they buy; yet these individual

drinkers also incorrectly or thoughtlessly *perceive*—whether intentionally, ignorantly, or obviously—the profile and realities of the small holders who grew their coffee.

This research detects an overlap of various labor ethics among Costa Rican small holders. It also detects an overlap of labor ethics among actors operating within the specialty coffee culture. However, the overlap between the ethical behaviors of small holders at coffee's origin and the coffee actors in the specialty coffee sphere is unrecognizable by both. Each separate sphere has trouble recognizing what each other's meanings and conceptions of ethical practices and behaviors are. Thus, relational ethics between the two seem disparate and invisible.

The investigation of both ethical *perceptions* and *conceptions* to the individual drinkers are critical because they create the link—the relational ethics—between themselves (the individual drinkers), the small holders, and the coffee actors in between. Ethics become the focal point that enable what actors understand, what people care about, and what could lead to a “sustainable” and a “meaningful” coffee industry. Ethics reflect individuals’ values and account for their behaviors—in both production and consumption spheres. Thus, this interplay of ethical behaviors, especially in the consumption sphere where individuals are faced with choice, involves a decision-making framework that generate consequences over time. The actions and responsibilities of each actor in the coffee commodity chain bleed into one another cross sectionally. Ethics, although conceived differently to each actor, do not exist in a vacuum; they exist in relationships, and how micro consumers enact ethical behavior implicates the entire coffee industry either supporting its innovation or furthering its negative consequences.

How individual drinkers, micro-retailers, micro roasters, and café owners engage in consumption expresses not only their socio-economic status, but also what they care about and what they value. Individual drinkers, micro retailers, micro roasters, and café owners in the consumption sphere can bolster these values or destroy them. Acts of mass consumption can also innovate models that constitute the act itself, such as producing new modes of advertising, or constructing alternative—even ethical—business models, such as shared values. Meaningful action thus shifts towards consumption. Although consumption can be a form of hedonism and desire, individuals can make and shape themselves as ethical beings through acts of consumption.

Consumers’, coffee retailers’, roasters’, and café owners’ ethical or unethical behaviors touch many lives, lives they will never know about, such as the lives of hundreds of thousands of

small holder coffee producers. Ethics then become action-oriented behavior—both in the forms of labor that small holders, coffee importers, traders, retailers, distributors, and roasters engage in, and in the forms of consumption that coffee drinkers engage in. An ethical framework begins by laying out the ethical *conceptions* first in the coffee production sphere, which small holders experience before their coffee even enters the consumption sphere. It begins by situating oneself in the context of the small holders... the toils, the routines, the challenges, the failures, the successes. I argue that awareness of small holder labor and behavioral ethics stimulates consumer responsibility to advocate for change not only at the production level, but within the entire coffee commodity chain.

This awareness is significant because at the end of the day, the coffee that drinkers sip on—more than 2 million cups daily—was grown, harvested, and processed by the touch of a human hand. No matter what micro consumers *perceive* or *conceive* of “ethics” in sourcing and buying coffee, their decision impacts those small holders who have made coffee drinking possible. Thus, overall, this research is an investigation of labor ethics (as they unfold and in the daily actions and lives of small holder coffee producers), and relational ethics (as they unfold between actors in the coffee commodity chain). For example, how do I, a consumer, create value from my perch in the coffee commodity chain standing at the intersection between local and distant coffee communities? How are ethics defined, conceptualized, and imagined (or not) in coffee production and consumption?

Sylvia Yanagisako advocates for the need to understand how capitalist motives, capitalist selves, and capitalist strategies are produced through the everyday practices and experiences of workers (Yanagisako, 2002). In other words, capitalism is an ongoing project (Appel, 2019, p. 26). Ethics, like capitalism, is also a project, not a theory, and it does not nor should not conform to a predetermined set of rules. This project begins in the coffee fields and identifies asymmetries in the resources and knowledge available to women and youth producers, struggles in gender empowerment, effects of climate change, and cycles of capitalist injustice spurred by coffee pricing mechanisms. These findings emerge through what I call “portraits of small holder producers.” If I look at all these issues through the lens of labor ethics, here is where actors may see some things differently, or even begin to see non-existent things.

## Part II: Portraits of Small Holders

### Chapter 5. Portraits of Costa Rican Small Holder Producers

A portrait of Doña Arsenia, including the processes she must go through and the barriers she must face, is part of a collection of similar experiences amongst Costa Rican small holders. Although each small holder expresses his/her version of a labor ethics differently, Doña Arsenia's portrait illustrates commonalities with other small holders in the issues they cyclically experience— issues pertaining to cultivation and marketing, and even larger issues impacting the entirety of the coffee industry.

#### **Doña Arsenia**

**Vuelta de Jorco, Valle Central, Costa Rica**

*Journal Excerpt July 19- 20, 2019*

When I arrive to Doña Arsenia's community of Vuelta de Jorco in the Valle Central coffee region, her son Carlos picks me up in an old, white jeep-like Suzuki. It is manual, as most 4-wheel cars are in the Costa Rican countryside, and it violently rattles up the steep dirt roads, steeper than the streets in San Francisco. Carlos is 28 years old and studies pharmacy at the University of Costa Rica. Carlos commutes to the University in San Jose (45 minutes away) every day of the week on his motor bike. On the weekends and during vacations, he stays with his mother on her farm to help with the agriculture work.

The fact that Carlos is a University student looking for potential future and alternative work industries beyond coffee represents the challenge of generational changes in rural areas, specifically in the coffee industry. Youth abandonment in the coffee industry sheds light on the current and future economic and social factors which make coffee production less attractive than alternative income generating activities in rural or urban areas (ICO, 2017). In most coffee-producing countries small holders are growing old and young people are less and less inclined to follow in their parents' footsteps and engage in coffee farming (ICO, 2017). Coffee farming is associated with low economic returns, high labor intensity, and physically demanding work. Issues in the coffee industry include climate change, pest control, urbanization, farms too small to secure a livelihood, and unprofitability (ICO, 2017). These issues increasingly deter youth

from engaging in family coffee production and negatively affect the supply of high-quality coffee beans. Carlos knows that his mother operates her farm independently, and he desires to help her as much as he can.

As Carlos and I climb the steep roads to his mother's farm, he tells me of his family's coffee history. Doña Arsenia's father had 14 children and had 28 hectares of land. Thus, each child equally inherited about two hectares of farmland—land irregularly shaped and not all conducive to coffee growing. The small amount of land that Doña Arsenia and her siblings own characterizes them as small holders.

## 5.1 Inheritance and Kinship

*“Land forms complex livelihood strategies, and is embedded in sets of meanings and relations that are more diverse. The questions that follow concern what rural land holding enables, and what it means.” – James Ferguson & Tanya Li*

In Costa Rica, “as in many agrarian societies, the family household is the major corporate social unit for mobilizing agricultural labor, managing productive resources, and organizing consumption” (Netting, 1993, p. 2). According to a study on the property, power, and political economy of farming households in Costa Rica, throughout Costa Rica, the vast majority of rural households continue to support themselves through coffee production, and the coffee farms in these communities tend to be small (Sick, 1998, p. 197). Men comprise 71% of landowners and own 82% of the land; women comprise 29% and own 18% of the land (Sick, 1998).

Coffee production is no exception when it comes to land signifying complex livelihood strategies and representing historical and ongoing social ties. Doña Arsenia's two-hectare plot takes the shape of a narrow strip of land that starts on lower ground and extends up into the hills. This strip of land contains all her family's coffee plants—the ones that are still cared for at least. The bottom-most portion of the inheritance was sold to a non-familial neighbor who raises cattle. The mid-portion of the land is owned by one of her older brothers, and Doña Arsenia owns the topmost-portion of the land—the land best primed for coffee cultivation because of its high altitude. Doña Arsenia tends to all the coffee plants on the remaining inheritance, even though all the mature plants are not on her portion. She says, “it is not my land, but these are MY plants.” Her brother and her neighbor essentially own the land, but have lent Doña Arsenia the coffee cherries, as long as she cultivates and harvests them. Her brother and neighbor have no part in

the coffee industry and reap none of the profit produced by them. Doña Arsenia's land ownership by Costa Rican law of kinship and inheritance demonstrates that "when people do succeed in accessing material support by drawing upon their social relationships, they do so only as a result of the prior formation of loyalties and obligations," or in other words, kinship networks (Ferguson & Li, 2018). Doña Arsenia cooperatively works with her family's ownership of land, even if she is not the heir.

In Costa Rica, there are several ways in which a small holder can acquire land. From the same study, data from the southern coffee region of Brunca shows that sons, (and occasionally daughters) who had not yet legally inherited were often "given" parcels of land to work either independently or cooperatively with their parents, but loaning, renting, or share cropping with those who have no future claim on the land was rare (Sick, 1998, p. 199). This situation reflects a type of kinship where Doña Arsenia owns the coffee plants, but not the land. The other principle means by which land is acquired is through inheritance. "Costa Rican law dictates that both sons and daughters inherit equally from their parents, but in practice land is not evenly inherited by men and women: only 37% of those who inherited land from a parent were women; however, women in the Brunca region do continue to inherit land, they just do so less often than their brothers" (Sick, 1998, pp. 199-200). Historical studies reveal that during the latter half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, changes in patterns of land use increased. The growth of the population caused land to become scarcer, and consequently, families increasingly urged some of their heirs either to hold shared rights on undivided farms, or to sell inheritance rights to other heirs or third parties, although selling farms is a complicated matter, (Samper, 1990, p. 220). A small holder I interviewed reports, "I do not see us selling the farm. Actually, my mom sold a little piece, sold a bit to a guy to build a house, something small but yes, she sold it. I see selling the farm very complicated." However, in recent times, real estate growth is expanding, and those coffee regions that border urban centers are being displaced by new residential areas and shopping centers (Mendez, 2017). Randall Obando, manager of a *beneficio* in the coffee region of Tres Ríos, claims that small holders are selling their farms for a few reasons: 1) the low prices and hard labor of coffee production tempt small holders in selling their valued land pressured by real estate offers, 2) increase of *roya*—stem rust—a devastating coffee disease that poses many challenges and profit loss for small holders, and 3) generational

change—youth who inherit farms that require maintenance are deterred from the coffee industry because of its low profitability and because of enticing real estate offers (Mendez, 2017).

Intergenerational change and youth abandonment of coffee farming poses current and future economic and social problems. A study of youth and coffee by the International Coffee Organization (ICO), reports that while most small holders in coffee-producing countries are growing old (the average age of a Costa Rican small holder is 56 years old), youth are less and less inclined to follow their parents' footsteps and engage in coffee farming (ICO, 2017). The lack of a new generation of young growers could negatively affect the supply of high-quality coffee beans, and thus change the historical, cultural, and social dynamics of one of Costa Rica's most important economic industries. The disinterest of youth in coffee production is spurred by changes in modernization, desire for increased standards of living, educational opportunities, higher economic returns, less demanding labor, and social status. However, youth are important factors in maintaining the coffee industry because they have the propensity to adopt technical innovations, implement new production techniques, and keep the lineage of small holders alive (ICO, 2017). Thus, current research is being conducted in response to these threatening generational changes and in finding resources, training, and courses that make the coffee industry more attractive to youth small holders.

Other principal means of land distribution and inheritance include: favoring heirs over others, financing outmigration of some heirs in hope of avoiding conflict, or dividing the farm equally into small lots (Gudmundson, 1995, p. 124). Other not so common principles of land inheritance are through the death of a spouse or the dissolution of a marriage (Sick, 1998). In a summary of Costa Rican inheritance and kinship laws Deborah Sick explains:

Generally, the economic relationships between parents and the households of married children vary greatly and depend in large part on how family resources are divided—or in some cases, shared. There is no clear norm dictating when parents will transfer control or title to family property to their children. In a few cases, while parents are still living, children receive clear title to family lands, but in most cases, parents simply provide use rights. The nature of these rights also varies from family to family and seems closely related to the way in which production is organized. Some families are “independently oriented” and might share capital goods such as trucks and tools, but children have full use rights to portions of their parents’ land and make all the decisions regarding the specific uses of land, labor, and incomes as they see fit. In “cooperatively-oriented” families, the parental and married children’s households combine labor and productive resources to farm parents’ land together. In these cases, children are “given” specific

plots of land to farm and may use the earnings as they please, but parents make most decisions concerning the use of capital goods, land, and labor. (1998)

Overall, there seem to be general trends in land inheritance and distribution, but there is no set rule of law. Patterns of inheritance and distribution are dictated by cultural, historical, and regional traditions. Generally, most small holder parents try to ensure that their children (at least their sons) have access to productive land, and small holder parents with larger properties rely on their children's labor to help work that land. Why some parents prefer to retain control over land, and their married children's labor, while others relinquish control early, is unclear. There are no norms or laws which prescribe how and when parents should relinquish control of their property (Sick, 1998). With these blurred lines of ownership and land transfers, it is crucial that small holder ownership of land is backed by community recognition of those rights. "Regardless of who holds a legal title, a small holder who has brought land into the household in essence retains control of that land and consequently the authority to contribute to decisions regarding the use of the property and any income derived from it. Community recognition of such pre-existing rights legitimizes control of property by small holders who do not have a legal title; a strong network of family and friends—[kinship]—can ensure that those rights are protected" (Sick, 1998, p. 209).

Additionally, kinship does not have to be biological. *Cooperativas* and *beneficios* play strong roles in the lives of small holders who sell their coffee to them. Without the institutions of the *cooperativas* and *beneficios*, many small holders would have no one to sell their coffee to—they cannot exist outside of the *cooperativa/beneficio* network. Thus, the *cooperativas* and *beneficios* act like a kinship system, uniting all small holders of a particular community together, sometimes offering benefits such as free fertilizers and retirement pensions as a gesture of communal belonging. However, increasingly *cooperativas* and *beneficios* do not treat their small holders as valued members and act more as an individualistic system, rather than as a kinship system.

Carlos, Doña Arsenia's son, asks if I want to visit the local *beneficio* of his community. The *beneficio* that Carlos takes me to has been closed and abandoned. Carlos tells me that it shut down because it lacked official licenses and documents. This particular *beneficio* was owned by a European (Carlos only knows this much about the *beneficio*'s ownership) who did not have the legal permits to operate. The *beneficio* was dumping the water from its coffee fermentation tanks into the river, thus polluting it, and this transgression was discovered by ICAFE—the Coffee

Research Institute of Costa Rica that runs experimental coffee crops, studies coffee mutations, and builds a database for small holders about soil conditions. The *beneficio* was shut down and abandoned immediately afterwards for unethical practices.

I ask Carlos where his community sells its coffee. He says that excluding the abandoned *beneficio*, there are three other *beneficios* that small holders can sell to. These *beneficios* are located far from the community, but there are dispensaries where small holders dump their daily harvest of coffee cherries. At the end of the day, giant trucks pick up the cherries and deliver them to the *beneficio* to begin processing.

There are three *beneficios* for small holders in this community. According to Carlos there is hardly any difference between each one, but each *beneficio* buys small holders' coffee at an extremely low price—robbing the small holders because they know that small holders have nowhere else to sell to. If all the *beneficios* pay the exact same price for coffee, how do they all stay in business? For example, if one can offer a slightly higher price and thus, get all the small holders to sell to them, why would they not? Carlos responds that membership to *beneficios* and *cooperativas* is political because small holders' preferences for which *beneficio/cooperativa* they sell to were established back in time according to the judgement of their ancestors. The places that small holder families sell to are historically set and hardly change because the process of membership requires many criteria. Also, to manage various accounts with multiple *beneficios* and *cooperatives* would not make sense if prices minimally vary and are in constant flux. Some months for example, certain *beneficios* might sell at a higher price than others, but the following month, the prices could swap. Thus, small holders tend to stick to the *beneficios* or *cooperativas* that their families have established in past generations; however, ultimately, the *beneficios* are the true winners since they control the post-harvest processes of production and have greater autonomy on negotiating costs and deciding who they will export their coffee to. Doña Arsenia sells her coffee to a *beneficio* called Volcafe. Volcafe represents a massive *beneficio* operated by ED & F Man: a London-based employee-owned agricultural commodities merchant with 7,000 people in 60 countries. Coffee is the only one of the several commodities they trade. Volcafe appears to have no direct relations with the small holders—if so, they do not advertise it. Furthermore, *beneficios* can have various processing plants within a single country, and Volcafe owns several within Costa Rica.

Thus, the continuity and health of the coffee industry is dependent upon kinship. Doña

Arsenia is one of many small holders who inherited her coffee land from her father, who inherited the land from *his* father. Doña Arsenia and other small holders depend on the help of their children to maintain the coffee plants and ensure productivity. If there were not any intergenerational ties, the coffee plants would become *maltratadas* (maltreated), *feas* (ugly), *insanas* (unhealthy), and *abandonadas* (abandoned), conditions befalling many fields because no kinship lineage was willing to take on the work needed to maintain the coffee—or in other words, to become a small holder. Essentially, landownership, kinship, and the coffee industry comprise and sustain one another. Primarily, landownership creates the identity of a small holder—it is what makes a small holder a small holder. Landownership is attached to values—it is attached to economic opportunity, identity, and to the proud lineage of small holders' ancestors. Land holds unwavering value to small holders because land is essentially the guaranteed thing that they primarily own. Small holder land ownership is created through informal laws of inheritance and is continued through networks of kinship—networks of familial, communal, and institutional (*cooperativa/beneficio*) support. However, small holders are facing a range of pressures that are endangering these kinship force that constitute the coffee industry such as youth abandonment, community selling of coffee farms due to low coffee prices, and the changing democratic values in *cooperativas*.

## 5.2 Lost Ideals in *Cooperativas*

In theory, belonging to *cooperativas* should be valued or desired by small holders more so than belonging to *beneficios* because small holder members should have more decision-making powers and are collective owners of the processing mills; however, lately *cooperativas* and *beneficios* have taken on the same meaning for small holders because the dominant narrative regarding both is that both buy at incredulously low prices. Another woman small holder coffee producer, Julia Gonzalez, from the small coffee community of Bustamante, voices her frustrations with the governing structures of *cooperativas*. Julia is one of Bean Voyage's Care Fellows—a program supporting youth within coffee communities who working on a coffee driven project. Julia lives at home with her mother and her younger brother. Julia's father died; thus, leaving the coffee farm to be maintained by Julia and her siblings and her elderly mother. Out of all the family's children, Julia is the only one interested in and passionate about working her family's coffee. However, neither Julia nor her brother, can commit to work the coffee full-time because of its economic unprofitability. Thus, both Julia and her brother went to college and

have jobs in the city. Consequently, Julia's mother pays a *peon*—a worker—to tend to her coffee field weekly... fertilizing, cleaning, chopping etc. Julia expresses worry about not knowing who will tend to their family's coffee field in the future once her mom passes away since her brother does not want to bear the burden of coffee inheritance. Like Doña Arsenia's family, Julia's situation also demonstrates coffee's dependence on kinship relations to continue its abundance. Both families also value the importance and necessity of family work as form of labor ethics.

### **Julia Gonzalez**

**Bustamante, Valle Central, Costa Rica Journal**

*Excerpt August 1st- 2nd, 2019*

I visit Julia's farm—her two-hectare portion of coffee land that extends up a hill behind her family's home. Yesterday, Julia was wearing slacks and high heels for her job in the city. Today, she emerges wearing denim jeans and hiking boots. Julia suggests that an aerial perspective is the best way to orient yourself to a new place; thus, she takes a drive up a steep road that evolves into a high ridge. Both the left side and right side of the ridge are framed with coffee trees planted in uniform lines extending down to the valley floor. Spreading out to the right and to the left are valleys of green. Julia points out that these green valleys are all coffee trees.

Julia's eyes scan the valleys below and fixate on tiny structures—*recibidores*—which are coffee collecting stations. These structures belong to the *beneficios*. Julia does not know who exactly owns the *beneficio* that her family uses despite selling their coffee to them for generations. She complies with a dominant narrative of small holder coffee producers—one that describes the process of small holders taking their coffee cherries to these *recibidores*, dumping them into chutes engraved with measurement marks, recording how much coffee is being delivered, receiving a pay check for the recorded volume of coffee, returning to their fields to continue harvesting, and then repeating the process over again—all the while not knowing who exactly is operating the *beneficio* they use.

Julia takes me to her *beneficio*'s collecting station and describes how it operates. During the harvest season, an employee simply marks the amount of coffee and the family name of the delivered coffee cherries. At the end of the day, a large truck from the *beneficio* or *cooperativa* comes to collect the cherries to bring back to the processing plant. In Julia's community of Bustamante, there are three collecting stations from three separate *beneficios* and *cooperativas* placed directly next to each other. Everywhere Julia looks, from the bus stop areas, to the trash

cans, to the empty wall space, she sees propaganda for these *beneficios* and *cooperativas*, almost as if each represents a political party that advertises itself to recruit membership despite any of them having price benefits over another.

Julia's *beneficio* is littered with decaying coffee cherries. Its sun-faded posters listing membership principles and its papers stating the buying price of coffee curl up at their edges from the weather (although upon closer look, the dates for the prices are from a few years back). This is the collecting station that Julia sells her family's coffee to. There is a metal scale to weigh the coffee, but really these collecting stations are just wooden shacks with faded paint that barely reveal the *beneficio*'s name. It is a scene of abandonment. Julia says that during harvest season, trucks loaded with coffee cherries line bumper to bumper all the way down the road to dump their cherries, but right now these collecting stations appear lifeless and dilapidated.

The gate Julia stands behind keeps people out during the non-harvest season; however, it serves as more than a physical barrier. Like the other small holders in her community, Julia is barred from the buyer and the consumer world. Julia's input stops there, right after she dumps her cherries. Julia, like other fellows in the Bean Voyage training program, has committed herself to a project that will hopefully contribute to solving a coffee-related issue in her community. Her project involves a strong emotional pull, because she not only desires, but also understands that her community needs to feel that they are contributing and valued members of the community's *cooperativa*. This is the meaning she ascribes to her labor. She states:

I want to create a *cooperativa* that is different. I want to get people to *feel* and identify with what I want to convey, which is that the people really *feel* that they are part of the *cooperativa*, and that they don't just drop off their coffee to be sold, but rather that they *feel* that they are the ones selling the coffee. (2019)

Julia, like Doña Arsenia and other small holders, share the same sentiments surrounding the changed values of *cooperativas* and the frustrations involved with low coffee prices. She claims:

There are *cooperativas* like Hermanos Santos, Agua Azul, Copilot... but they work the same as *beneficios*. You leave them the coffee and they sell it and that is all. From my perspective, and in this zone, they [*cooperativas* and *beneficios*] are the same (2019).

Julia views *beneficios* and *cooperativas* as the same entities. *Cooperativas* are adopting a *beneficio* or a large company-like structure. The feelings of belonging to and being valued in a *cooperativa* are lost amongst the individual small holders. There is diminished sense of

collectivity. Julia questions the governing structures of *cooperativas* since there should be a fundamental difference between the two—*cooperativas* should essentially belong to the community and its members should have a voice in decisions, while *beneficios* are Julia operated by large foreign companies who have no direct relation with its small holders. Julia asserts:

I am going deeper into the idea of a *cooperativa*—I want to seek and find someone who can help me evaluate these things in depth. In one zone, there's a *cooperativa* for electricity, which has benefited many people because it helps the community by giving them public light or electric cables. This is what gave me the idea of a *cooperativa*. The idea of a *cooperativa* is this: the unity of a group. I have to investigate more in depth how to create a *cooperativa*—how to carry out accountability, all this and the technicalities in my community. I have to study this because there is a law book in Costa Rica for *cooperativas* and I have bought it to read to see if this plan is viable or if it is too complex and not a good idea to complicate ourselves, but I think these are just technicalities .... It's better to have clarity before proposing something new. (2019)

Julia sets herself apart from small holders who are subject to the unjust and corporate structure that both *beneficios* and *cooperativas* alike impose. She labors—aside from the work her city job demands—to invest in and research the values of *cooperativas* for the reason of creating a community *cooperativa* that is true to the values of unity and accountability. Julia realizes that small holders like herself, no longer feel the benefits and values that being a member of a *cooperativa* should create; thus, she seeks to uncover what a successful *cooperativa* means, and then replicate it. The ethics of Julia's labor settles on her desire to see this task through. She defines *cooperativa* success as follows:

Apart from finances and profits, I think that uniting the group so that people really feel that the *cooperativa* is theirs and a *cooperativa* is successful if people feel that the success is theirs. If the *cooperativa* earns well, these earnings are also theirs. If it has failings, the failings are also theirs. Now people sell coffee to a *beneficio* because there are no options. If there were another option, I *believe* they would *believe* in this other option. (2019)

The reasons why *cooperativas* have strayed from these sentiments and mutual feelings of unity and accountability are because 1), they are so large in size that the governing structures cannot possibly invest in their members as more than just a coffee supplier (no personal relations) and 2), the governing bodies of the *cooperativas* are not actually small holders themselves. For example, the administrative bodies of *cooperativas* are often not small holders. Rather, the

members of a *cooperativa* vote for their governing board because a small holder cannot be working in their coffee fields while simultaneously serving as president of their *cooperativa*. There is simply not enough time to do both. Thus, technically, *cooperativas* are still democratic entities because they have electing bodies, but *who* is in power might not always be the best representative for small holders. This missing facet of relatability of the shared knowledge, practices, and issues that small holders experience is vital in creating an ethical *cooperativa* that its members value and contribute to—more than just contributing their coffee. According to Julia, “a person with power should understand the life of a small holder in order to practice empathy.” She continues:

I should think that the president would be a coffee producer. But I cannot say. It should be someone who is acquainted with the environment of coffee production and who knows the problems. The *cooperativas* I know of do not watch out for the well-being of the producer. I belong to an association for community development. I am a believer in community development; I believe in local government and that the way to go is have everyone united. So, I like to be there [in her community development center] helping and I feel that people follow me. (2019)

Julia uses the word “association,” which seems to differ from the ostensible *cooperativa* structures in Costa Rica. Julia refers to *beneficios* and *cooperativas* as *empresas*—businesses. She claims that a potential solution to maintaining a cooperative-like structure could be to limit the *cooperativa*’s size (number of members) in order for *cooperativas* to preserve their core values. Associations are coming to be known as true *cooperativa* models because they remain small, and each member can feel that they are a contributing and valued member.

Julia also demonstrates her allegiance to her family’s coffee under the informal laws of kinship; however, she also demonstrates a strong belief in local community engagement and unity, which she argues is the most important bond in creating an ethical and valuable *cooperativa*. Both Julia and Doña Arsenia view *beneficios* and certain *cooperativas* as foreign and faceless, a site that elicits anti-kinship sentiments. From the small holders of whom many inherit their *cafetal* (coffee plots), to the work distributed within and across families, to the loyalties small holders have to their *cooperativas* or *beneficios*, the coffee industry rests on the concept of kinship. Even in the capitalist framework, capital surplus and re-generation depends on the reproduction of labor—or kinship systems. If the concept of kinship erodes in the coffee industry such as changing *cooperativa* values, the migration of youth into urban occupations, the

unwillingness of children to inherit their family's coffee, or the selling of coffee farms to third parties, what will become of the future coffee industry? The absence of strong kinship networks, such as through *cooperativas* that many small holders are a part of, features an ethical and critical zone in producing justice and instilling values—an ethical matter occupying the minds and efforts of small holder coffee producers. As James Ferguson and Tanya Li note, the great majority stay in place for reasons that include social membership (kin, community, or national) and the sense of wellbeing that membership supplies" (Ferguson & Li, 2018). Despite the threats that are eroding kinship networks in the coffee industry, access to land bestows membership and holds meanings that cannot be reduced to material value as the portraits of the small holders will illustrate. Kinship, landownership, and its social reproduction reside firmly within creations of value amongst small holders—capitalist value included.

### 5.3 Coffee Prices

**Doña Arsenia Vuelta de Jorco, Valle Central,  
Costa Rica**

*Journal Excerpt July 19- 20, 2019*

Carlos discusses the Cost Rican coffee pricing system with me. Small holders harvest their coffee using *cajuelas*—baskets—which are strapped around their waists. Each *cajuela* holds 20 liters of coffee cherries. Twenty *cajuelas* amounts to one *fanega*—a 400-liter container, which is the standard unit of measurement used by *cooperativas* and *beneficios*. One *fanega* is equal to one burlap sack of coffee, which is approximately 47 kilos or about 100 pounds. Coffee is measured in volume rather than weight, because the weight of the coffee bean fluctuates during processing and roasting. When coffee is roasted for a longer period of time—to obtain a dark roast—the coffee bean has less density and less mass. It would take a greater amount of dark roasted coffee to equal one pound of light roasted coffee; thus, coffee is measured by volume to maintain uniformity.

Small holders—assuming that they sell their coffee to either a *cooperativa* or *beneficio*—bring their coffee to the *recibidor*—the collecting/receiving station—where their cherries are deposited into metal boxes, usually supplied by ICAFE. There are typically two options—two separate chutes—to sort the coffee. One option is “premium,” and the other is “conventional.” Premium coffee requires that the beans have fewer defects, for example, coffee

(underripe/premature coffee cherries), fungus, leaf rust, or pests (*chasparría, roya, or broca*), and dryness (coffee that has already begun fermenting). Ideally, premium coffee should contain only perfectly ripe red cherries. The acceptance of pesticides in “premium” coffee differs from each *cooperativa* and *beneficio*. Often times, *cooperativas* and *beneficios* claim that they process only “organic,” or pesticide free non-synthetic fertilized coffee, but in reality, one must personally go to the actual small holders’ *cafetal*—coffee plots—to see if they are actually abiding by the “organic” criteria. Some small holders I interviewed claimed that *cooperativas* and *beneficios*, especially large ones, do not have the human resources to check-in with their producer members to ensure that the coffee is “organic” (See pp. 62-63). Conventional coffee is not so strict with its requirements and is accepting of coffee defects; consequently, premium coffee sells for a higher price per *fanega*. Small holders might actually be producing high quality coffee that could be sold at premium price in the international market; however, they would never know nor get their proper compensation because this fine coffee is being mixed in with the cheaper/underripe/defective coffee to increase the volume and thus, the revenue. Premium coffee involves more work with reduced yields, so the trade-off is not worth it for many small holders; thus, most small holders sell their coffee as conventional.

At the *cooperativas*’ and *beneficios*’ collecting/receiving stations, small holders empty their sacks of coffee into the metal containers—either premium or conventional—where an employee measures the volume of the coffee cherries. If the cherries do not fill an entire bin, the employee marks the highest level of the coffee with a ruler. The employee then writes down the volume of coffee on a receipt, which the small holder then takes to another employee who transcribes the numbers and the small holder’s family name into the *cooperativa*’s or *beneficio*’s record book in exchange for a check. This process is repeated with each *fanega* small holders harvest.

In the production sphere, Costa Rican small holders get paid per *fanega*. Doña Arsenia explains that her *beneficio* buys her coffee for 87,000 *colones* or \$174 USD per *fanega*. Julia Gonzalez claims that \$220 USD per *fanega* is a “good” price for coffee; thus, the coffee currently being sold by small holders falls way below what is considered “good,” or in their words, “just.” If the price per *fanega* (between \$100-\$200 USD) is further broken down by *cajuelas* (twenty *cajuelas* = one *fanega*), small holders earn between \$5- \$8 USD per basket. To fill one *cajuela* takes about one or two hours, depending on the efficiency and experience of the

picker. During the 2019 harvest, my father and I attempted to fill one *cajuela* with Doña Arsenia's coffee. Jointly, we filled one *cajuela* in 4 long hours, underestimating the difficulty and tediousness involved to individually pluck one bean at a time while standing on steep hills and in narrow rows—all under the midday sun. Essentially, that day my father and I each earned \$2.50 USD.

#### 5.4 No Waged Labor in Coffee Production

Perhaps the most shocking aspect about earning \$5 USD for a day's worth of coffee picking is that the \$5 represents only the final buying price of coffee as a commodity. In other words, \$5 is the total end price that the *cooperativa* or *beneficio* pays for a basket of coffee, which excludes all other input costs. Coffee is the final output, but the inputs involved in coffee production also need to be accounted for. For example, the price small holders receive for their coffee is not enough to consistently cover the variable and fixed costs of producing coffee and make a profit.

The Specialty Coffee Association (SCA)—the trade organization for the high-quality, specialty coffee industry—conducted one of the most comprehensive literature reviews to date on costs of producing coffee (Montagnon, 2017). According to the SCA, annual variable costs for small holders include hired labor during harvest, individual labor, family labor, transportation, and sometimes machinery operations (if small holders have their own micro mill). Fixed costs include machinery depreciation, machinery operation, administration/overhead for belonging to a *cooperativa* or *beneficio*, planting renovation, water, fertilizers, pesticides, and taxes, interests, and insurance (Montagnon, 2017).

Furthermore, there exists no equivalent daily wage for small holders. Often, labor quantity (e.g., number of days) is missing, which makes it impossible to assess labor productivity as well as equivalent daily wages. The equivalent daily wage (EDW) equation might be regarded as one of the most important coffee profitability parameters for many small holders (Montagnon, 2017). The EDW can be calculated as follows:

gross income - cash costs

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# of days dedicated to coffee  
growing/harvesting

The equation subtracts gross income (revenue from selling coffee) from cash inputs (fixed and variable costs), then divides it by the number of days small holders dedicate to coffee growing and harvesting to approximate the overall price small holders make per harvest season. However, small holders' labor is difficult to calculate since coffee is a yearlong industry. The number of days and the number of hours per day that small holders dedicate to farm work fluctuates depending on factors such as the time of year (harvest/non-harvest season), the erratic rainfall patterns, and the number of pests and fungus affecting the coffee. Other factors include how many times the small holders spray their crops with fertilizers or pesticides. One last thing to consider is that coffee does not lend itself to mechanical harvesting; thus, during harvesting season, women and children labor are mobilized to ensure that none of the crop goes to waste (Sick, 1998).

The equation is further complicated because often, small holders include migrant labor to help during the harvest. Migrant labor is another site for unethical conduct since essentially migrants' employers are the small holders who do not even make a profit themselves; thus, migrant pickers earn dismal amounts and are housed in temporary and squalid structures. Doña Arsenia exclaims:

Ethics is to try to get the best person of you. And justice is paying a just salary. This happens a lot, that a person [small holder] has employees—Nicaraguans—and they pay them shit. They are without insurance and living in deplorable conditions. (2019)

Thus, those extra labor inputs need to be deducted from the overall price small holders receive for their coffee. These factors determine the workdays and work hours small holders invest in their coffee, thus making an hourly, daily, even annual salary impossible to calculate.

Costa Rica has a strong history of high quantity and quality coffee production. According to the Economic Complexity Index (ECI), Costa Rica exported over \$320 million USD of coffee in 2017 and had an overall positive trade balance \$525 million, yet I am wary that quantitative assessments performed on coffee producing household economies are not represented in macro-national economies (Simoes, 2017). As economic anthropologist Hannah Appel questions, “how national economies become *intelligible*, possessing representational unity naturalized authority, —is the stuff of fantasy, desire, power, and subjugation” (Appel, 2017). Appel’s explorations function in dialogue with the anthropology of capitalism and the social institutions of finance, where questions of market actors, institutions, money, and the expertise of

economics have frequently taken center stage. Appel makes an argument for ethnographic possibilities in the face of national economies. Additionally, political anthropologist James Ferguson highlights the concerns of relying on statistics and quantitative measure as economic indicators (Ferguson, 1994). He claims that such indicators are sometimes virtually non-existent, based on many assumptions, highly inaccurate, and hardly true because falsifying numbers are better than having none at all (Ferguson, 1994). Furthermore, Ferguson questions the different types of developments that economics attempts to measure, arguing that common metrics quantify progression toward a known end point, usually modern industrial capitalism, rather than the improvement in quality of life and the alleviation of poverty. A more qualitative assessment can be used for an alternative economic analysis. Economics can be refigured as a subject matter needing attention rather than as opponent, especially in the analysis of coffee prices where set labor costs are impossible to quantify—frankly they are unaccounted for—and fixed costs are seasonally determined.

## 5.5 The C-Price Crisis

These complex and fluctuating production costs (including fixed, variable, and labor) highlight the concern of relying on statistics and quantitative measurements as economic indicators to set a coffee price for small holders. However, statistics and quantitative measurements are the exact indicators that set the price of coffee on the international market. Macro consumers buy and trade coffee by its commodity market price per pound. This price is called the C price (the exchange price for Arabica coffee). Green coffee is an agricultural commodity, so can be traded on commodity markets. Commodities, by definition, are goods that are relatively nonperishable, storable, transportable, and interchangeable (Grabs, 2014). Thus, coffee traded on the Intercontinental Exchange (ICE) is a major commodities exchange market based in New York City. All coffee is treated as one raw material, regardless of origin or other factors. Even specialty coffee prices are usually linked to the C price, plus a premium. (Boydell, 2018).

Arabica fair-to average quality coffee is pretty much indistinguishable from another bag of the same. This interchangeability of coffee makes it possible to be bought and sold indirectly. The commodity market mechanism is further complicated because coffee is not technically traded nor bought in real time; rather, coffee is traded on futures contracts. Future contracts constitute the commitment to accept delivery of a specified quantity of coffee, at a specific port of entry, at a specific point in time (Boydell, 2018). Thus, like stocks, a much larger volume of

coffee is traded back and forth than what actually exists in the physical market. The C price is established in this futures market to help discover the “spot” price in the physical market. Thus, in the futures market, one can capitalize on such a prediction by selling futures at the current price in the hope of buying them back at a lower price.

Those who can capitalize on the C price through the futures market are those typically embedded in the consumption sphere roles such as the buyers, international traders, the distributors, and roasters. If the market demonstrates volatility (which it frequently does because the market is driven by supply, demand, and specialty coffee trends), buyers and sellers can sit out turbulent times and wait for price stabilization (Grabs, 2014). Unfortunately, however, many small holders are not in that position. “Individual small holders that sell cherry or wet parchment coffee to intermediaries have a 24- to 48-hour window from harvest to sales before quality begins to become affected. Small holder groups and cooperatives, in turn, increasingly face “price-to-be-fixed” contracts that only specify a tradable quantity and delivery date and take the C market price of a given month” (Grabs, 2014). Small holders are essentially locked into buying contracts and must accept the given price offered for their coffee. Julia Gonzalez, a producer from the Valle Central region claims:

I want to look for another market because we sell our coffee to a business, a *beneficio*, a foreign person, and this *beneficio* person is the one who negotiates the final product for the consumer. Between us [small holders] and this person there are many people so the earnings from the coffee are banked [put in the bank accounts] among this large number of people. (2019)

Ultimately, actors in the coffee consumption sphere are autonomous individuals, since they have a level of control over their actions and make the final purchasing choice from their many available options. Small holders do not benefit from this market tactic since they are locked into their *cooperativa* or *beneficio*’s contracts. Small holders are excluded from choice—from considering who to sell their coffee to, to negotiating prices for their coffee, and to knowing about the changes that unfold in consumer behaviors regarding the specialty coffee industry. For example, Don Eduardo, a small holder from the Brunca coffee region claims:

Small holders need a specialist or something that we contract to manage prices and who can sit and negotiate with the big companies, so we can say, “no, I think my coffee is very high quality and deserves a different price”—this could be done. For example, if New York says that the market is at \$200 USD for a *fanega*, if I was mediator

[middleman], I could say no, my coffee is worth \$300 dollars a *fanega*. (2019)

Don Eduardo demonstrates how small holders have no autonomy to exercise choice in the coffee market or make decisions to sell or abstain. They relent to the prices offered by the *beneficio* or *cooperativa* because their need for immediate cash is driven by seasonal cycle of coffee production. To sit-out a season and wait for better prices, or to negotiate their own prices, would jeopardize their annual income. Thus, small holders are greatly impacted by market volatility and low C prices. Ensuring profitability from coffee is rare since producers struggle to even cover the costs of production. For example, over the last five years the C price per pound of coffee fluctuated between 0.87 cents and \$1.68 USD (Market Insider, 2020) (See figure 3.) Caravela Coffee (a privately-run coffee export business) published a recent study on six Latin American coffee producing countries on cost analysis. The study presented that in coffee “more than 70 percent of the total production cost goes towards labor costs and that production costs fall in the range of \$1.05 to \$1.40 per pound” (Tark, 2018).

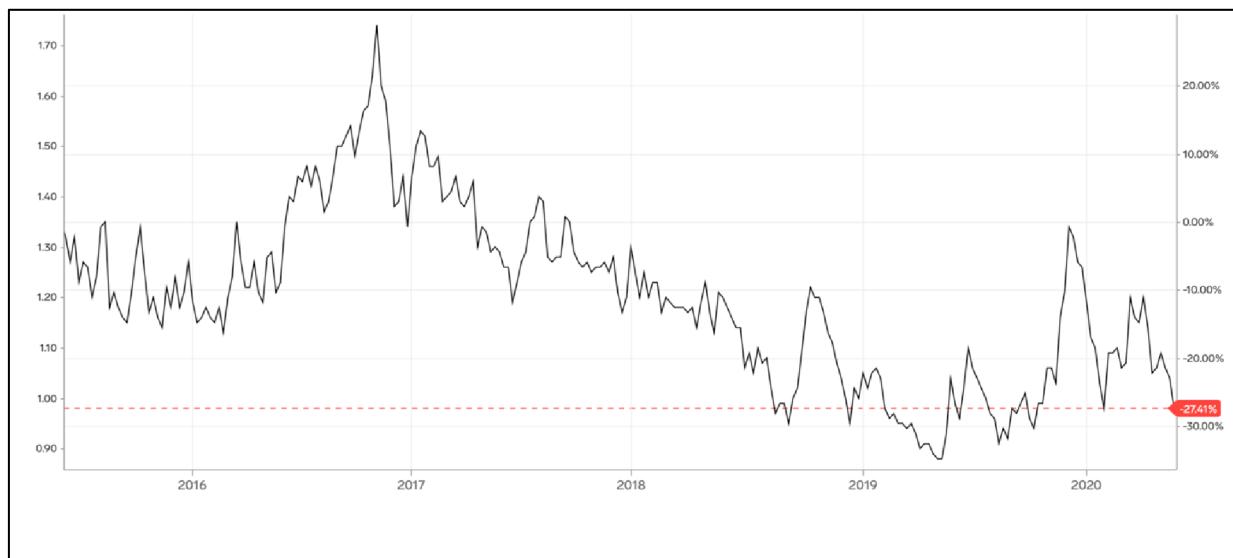


Figure 3. Global Coffee Prices from 2015-2020 (Market Insider).

According to the market's numbers, it seems as if the cost of producing coffee would balance out or even be lower than the C price for coffee; thus securing a positive net profit for small holders, but increasingly coffee prices are far below the costs of production. Additionally, these production costs are fixed costs, meaning that individual, family, nor hired labor are considered. Coffee production becomes unprofitable if labor becomes monetized, thus coffee

farmers are losing money (Tark, 2018). For example, a study by the SCA found that the cost of production of one pound of green coffee to be \$1.66 including family labor according to local daily wage, and \$1.10 without including labor (Montagnon, 2017). If the C price for coffee within this past year (2019-2020) fluctuated between its lowest 87 cents and highest \$1.39 USD per pound, then the small holders become unprofitable if labor is monetized. The crisis of the coffee price is a recurring and dominant narrative amongst small holder producers.

Cost of Production per lb. of green coffee: \$1.10  
Cost of production considering family labor: \$1.66

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Current market price per lb. of green coffee: \$0.98  
= negative profit of 68 cents per lb. of coffee considering labor

Within the past year, the C price has dropped below \$1.00 USD per lb. establishing some of the lowest prices the C market has ever seen. “The collapse of world coffee prices,” wrote Peter Fritsch of the *Wall Street Journal*, “is contributing to a social meltdown affecting an estimated 125 million people from Central America to Africa” (Fritsch, 2002). Small holders are stuck in a cycle of negative profitability which has a series of implications: perpetual poverty, youth abandonment of coffee to secure more profitable urban careers, and small holders needing to diversify their incomes through growing other crops or taking on other jobs to earn money. Further, climate change and pests/fungus exacerbate unprofitability by decreasing small holders’ yield to sell. When asked if *cooperativas* or *beneficios* offer membership advantages to alleviate or compensate their small holder producer members during price crises, Julia responds:

Perhaps the only benefit is that they finance fertilizers, but the result is that one pays back this financing at harvest time when the coffee is picked. However, at the time of payment for the price of coffee, the *beneficio* does not give a good price. (2019)

She continues:

One feels a dull taste, a deception of hope for more profit, but at the end of the harvest what happens is a turnover. You have profit, but this profit is used to pay off debt and the debt pays for the profit, and it is a circle that does not end (2019).

Julia alludes to the inescapable cycle that small holders are bound into because they have no choice but to accept the cheap price that her *beneficio* pays. Those extra cents that small holders

desire to demand go unnoticed by buyers or chase away buyers who can purchase coffee from the thousands of other small holders elsewhere. Thus, small holders surrender their coffee to the cheap market C price, which is not even a break-even price. The bodily, infrastructural, material, and physical demands involved to produce coffee breeds a vicious cycle for small holders where labor goes uncalculated, and the economic obstacles compound each other. As Julia assures, “if one does not have one’s own *beneficio*, I do not see another way to sell...”

Ximena Vargas, a youth small holder from the Guanacaste coffee region, also states it would be impossible for her family to operate outside their *cooperativa* as an individual small holder family with their own label because of the amount of capital and machinery needed. It is not worthwhile to try to operate independently because it would take too much time. A small holder without access to processing equipment would realistically have devise a method to remove the coffee cherry skin and then dry the beans by sunlight which takes days as opposed to hours. Next, she would have to buy some sort of roaster (which are extremely expensive) and learn the art of roasting; or she would have to roast in a pan over the fire which would also take hours (assuming that the small holder has access to the domestic market, which mainly sells pre-roasted, ground, and packaged coffee); and then she would have to invest in packaging (the coop supplies the packaging); and then she would have to seek out a direct buyer. The labor, time, and capital needed for a small holder to operate without the aid of the *beneficio* or *cooperativa* would be too demanding and unprofitable. Therefore, small holders rarely have another choice other than join a *beneficio* or *cooperativa*, even if the prices or governing system are unjust.

Ximena’s father affirms that it is better to invest in improving the *cooperativa* that a small holder is a part of and hope to catalyze change from within instead of branching off and trying to do something independently. Ultimately the *cooperativa*, while a point of injustice, is also a great resource (all the machinery and market access) and small holders are connected through it. It would be inefficient and ineffective to embark on an individual endeavor to process and sell coffee without access to capital.

## 5.6 Coffee Price Injustice

Justice became a normative ethic amongst small holders. The C price, which determines the *cooperativas* and *beneficio*’s price per *fanega*, is the pinnacle of injustice for many small holders. Julia regards justice as:

We [she and her fellow *beneficio* members] achieve justice when we agree that we all have success. Success is when what we work for is paid for by what we deserve. The moment that this happens we can say that we have reached a part of what is success. (2019)

When asked if other small holders in her community feel the same way towards *cooperativas* and *beneficios* regarding prices, she responds:

Everyone [small holders in her community] mentioned the same thing—the matter of prices. It is a fact that prices are always low, and we are poorly paid. As a result, we cannot attend to the coffee to improve it, so in not attending to the coffee, it is not good quality and therefore the price drops even lower. The root of the problem was the price—if the price was good then the other parts would be ok too. I remember only one year when the price of coffee was good—in all of my life memories—only one year. (2019)

Julia describes the difficulty, and even pain, of being cyclically subjected to “unjust” coffee prices each year. She refers to the unsustainable nature of coffee production and mentions how “fair” prices might create a more equitable industry. The labor Julia describes in coffee production will always be physically demanding, but the fact that small holders are not compensated for that work is where the conceived sentiments of unethical conduct of the *cooperativas* and *beneficios* arise. Doña Arsenia similarly relates unethical conduct to the low prices *cooperativas* and *beneficios* pay. She states:

Ethics is not benefiting yourself at the cost of others work, because my coffee is being bought rather low from one *beneficio* and at others too. Ethics means if someone works for me, then I pay him the salary that corresponds to the work. Ethics means not putting anyone down so that I can move up. It is not treating, if I were to have them—employees—unjustly. I would pay them justly. I want to call forth the best of me, myself. (2019)

Julia follows with:

The difficulties in the production of coffee are the fact that a person is not paid for the work done. This is seen not only in the production of coffee but in agriculture in general. This is the hardest thing... and even though the pay is very little for what is being produced, to produce something is also very expensive. So, it is difficult to maintain a business with costs so high and earnings so low. (2019)

Julia notes that small holders are compensated only for the final commodity of coffee that they produce, not at all for their labor, nor other input costs. As Caravela Coffee’s report states,

“Without knowing how much producers need to spend to produce a pound of coffee, and how that varies across countries and production methods, it’s hard to know what sustainable prices really are” (Tark, 2018). Small holders generally regard the *cooperativas* or *beneficios* as the perpetrators of price injustice. As Julia notes, “It is not ‘just’ that the *beneficios* are profiting thanks to us [small holders]” (2019). Doña Arsenia also voices Julia’s frustration:

Now comes the fight to not give all my coffee to the *beneficios*. I am trying to find all options. This is very hard because you have to fight against the wholesale people to find out where to sell your coffee. It is not easy—it is a constant struggle. (2019)

Doña Arsenia also suggest that *beneficios* demonstrate unethical behavior in other aspects beyond unjust pricing. She remarks about the subpar quality of coffee that *beneficios* sell at high prices:

What they sell to consumers is no good, is, rather dirty and disgusting. That I could take this coffee and sell it to someone, grind it, and make a mountain of money? Nescafe smells bad. Where did I learn this? I learned it yesterday at the university. Nescafe is stinky; it smells like earth and moisture and the professor said to me that this probably has fungus too. The instructor told us that he saw this mountain of coffee and asked where is it going? And the *beneficio* did not want to say. But he pressed until they told him that someone buys it for a low price and they take it away and they dry it, they grind it, they clean it, and sell it at a higher price. Is this just? Ethical? No. this is not ethical. Never. (2019)

Although prices are set on the Intercontinental Exchange in New York City, consumers might not know all the factors and issues required in the making of a cup of coffee. Consumers might be aware of the described toils and difficulties of coffee production without knowing the specific cost inputs, while on the other hand, small holders might not be aware of consumers’ limited knowledge of coffee production. This situation paints a portrait where only each actor can partially see the entire canvas. Consumers and small holders do not know the dynamics involved within each one’s sphere. For example, Don Eduardo, a small holder farmer from the Branca coffee region states:

Most consumers don’t have a realistic idea of the cost and sacrifice that small holders like us bear. We are small and everything costs us a lot. People who work in Starbucks have come here and been struck by the process, what it means to see coffee turned into a cup of coffee. They cannot imagine what is behind that coffee—the diseases, plague, costs, expensive labor, everything... many people do not grasp this. (2019)

Don Eduardo refers to those that set unjust prices which he describes as having “no ethics.” He continues, “If people were more conscientious of everything involved in producing coffee, they would not set low prices.” Julia and other small holders also express this frustration through the unprofitability of their hard work. She states:

The fall of coffee prices is something that has come over all the years. It is not a problem of a single year or month, but rather it accumulates and affects us for a long time. It’s very sad for one to see that all the work done over a whole year at the end of the day comes to nothing. It is painful to struggle all year only in the end to not receive what you deserve. So, then we keep on, keep on working the coffee because it is something we have, and it is a shame to lose it. One would wish to see the coffee price surge in order to have joy. In these past years there have been more sorrows than joys. (2019)

Unjust prices are the recurring narrative for all small holders. *Cooperativas* and *beneficios* focus on this price narrative as the one that unites all, but in reality, there are many other issues that occur in the coffee industry such as certification barriers, coffee diseases, climate patterns, labor conditions, environmental concerns, and power asymmetries that coffee producers experience. These issues are not visibly addressed nor considered in the calculation of a wage for small holders. As the Caravela Coffee report states, “the sustainability of the coffee industry starts by understanding costs of production and the variables that affect it.” Until we know this, sustainability is impossible” (Tark, 2018). Don Eduardo states, “I think people should have some consciousness for why coffee cannot be a cheap thing, because it actually carries a significant cost;” he continues, “if we believe that something is not correct, there has to be a solution” (Don Eduardo, 2019). However, from the perspective at the opposite end of the coffee commodity chain, the actors in the consumption sphere—those with market power in the coffee industry—struggle to see any coffee price crisis.

Macro consumers profit from price volatility since they are fundamentally unbothered by changes in the C price (Hicks, 2018). Take for example, a coffee shop. Paul Hicks, writer for the Catholic Relief Service’s Cofffeeland’s Ethical Trade Project, explains how the C price—regardless if it is high or low—has very little bearing on the cost to produce a cup of coffee in a specialty coffee shop. If a cappuccino costs four dollars USD, what goes into that four dollars? Certainly not a pound of coffee, but rather only a few grams of coffee actually exists in that cappuccino. If the other costs involved in a cup of coffee are dissected (rent, real estate, payroll,

utilities, insurance, taxes, etc.), the cost of the coffee bean is, in fact, negligible (Hicks, 2018). This example also demonstrates why the cost of a cup of coffee does not rise or fall with the C price; thus, the cost that small holders receive to produce a pound of coffee has very little influence on the overall retail price of a cup of coffee. However, specialty coffee shops are frequently increasing their prices per latte. It is not abnormal to buy a seven-dollar latte plus tip at a local coffee shop, or even at Starbucks where prices are drastically hiked up depending on the syrups or milk types. While commercialization and marketing are industrializing, expanding, and profiting, small holders remain within their bounds of production determined by *cafetal* (coffee plot) size, rainfall, and pest/fungus infiltration. Additionally, unlike most other agricultural commodities, coffee cultivation and harvesting are all done by hand. There is no mechanization to facilitate nor to increase yield productivity in coffee.

The buying and selling experiences from the two spectrums differ greatly. Price indicators and measurements do not signify the same to thing to the small holder and to the macro buyers/traders. The differences in measurements are inconceivable to both consumer and small holder. The small holder sees the price per *fanega*, which is always too low for the amount of work put in, while the macro buyer sees the market price per pound, which if low, is celebrated. Small holders do not see market nuances that queue buyers when to buy, sell, or trade. Small holders only see low coffee prices one year after another.

The economy of the coffee market produces different concerns and issues for small holders and consumers alike; however, it is clear that the C market price cannot account for the diversity and unpredictability that small holders continuously face with each new coffee season. Furthermore, the C price is inadequate in assessing a consistent wage for small holders by failing to account for labor costs; yet in its defense, calculating when and what constitutes small holder labor is another challenge. Julia—unlike many small holders—demonstrates a knowledge that the unjust pricing is not just the fault of the *beneficio*. She realizes the industry of coffee production is complex and that so are the mechanisms that determine coffee’s price. She states:

I think countries that do not have coffee, or as much coffee, know how to appreciate a cup of coffee because you see a foreign person here and offer a cup of coffee for six thousand colones (ten dollars USD), he will not buy it unless he knows the quality. But to get the value of a cup of coffee would be very complicated—to find a market that really pays what it should pay would be very complicated. (2019)

The C price solidifies an economic market devoid of qualitative figures that cannot be represented by a general breakdown of prices geared for a futures market. This type of economics is not about the real world at all—at least not the world of coffee production. It is an abstract model of the working out of subjective individual consumer choices in relation to one another (Wolf, 2010, p. 10). “The ‘real economy’ of the coffee sector consists of millions of small holders who produce the world’s coffee; processing mills and roasters who add value to coffee; (dis) honest traders and retailers; and coffee drinkers around the world” (Hicks, 2018). This coffee research hopes to delineate the processes at work in a capitalist market while at the same time following the effects on the micro-populations in the subculture of the coffee industry (Wolf, 2010, p. 23).

### **5.7 Market Obscurity and Unsustainability**

Doña Arsenia explains that small holders who sell their coffee cherries to the *beneficio* have no idea where their coffee goes. After small holders drop off their coffee, the knowledge of where their coffee goes ends. They have no idea what company the *beneficio* sells their coffee to, whether their coffee is sold raw or roasted, nor what country their coffee ends up in. In almost all instances, the last moment that small holders interact with their coffee is when they dump it into the *beneficio*’s collecting stations as ripe red cherries. Figure 3. illustrates the particular trajectory that Doña Arsenia’s coffee follows from the first step—cultivation in her field—to the final step—consumption by individual drinkers. Small holders have no idea that perhaps, their coffee ends up inside an oat-milk latte sold at the price of six USD dollars (in reality only about 300 mg of caffeine is inside a medium Starbucks latte), which is approximately 5x the price that small holders sell an entire pound of coffee for. However, small holders do know that they are receiving much less than what they should and need to receive in order to cover their costs of production.

After the small holder’s coffee is sold to the *beneficio* or *cooperativa*, the chain of actors who interact with that coffee increases its value through each stage. These macro consumer actors have more knowledge and negotiation flexibility in who they sell the coffee to. While small holders generally have one option (either the *cooperativa* or *beneficio* that exists in the community) for selling their coffee, the individual coffee drinker has seemingly infinite options. Take a walk down the supermarket coffee aisle for an example. The disparity in options and choices is stark.

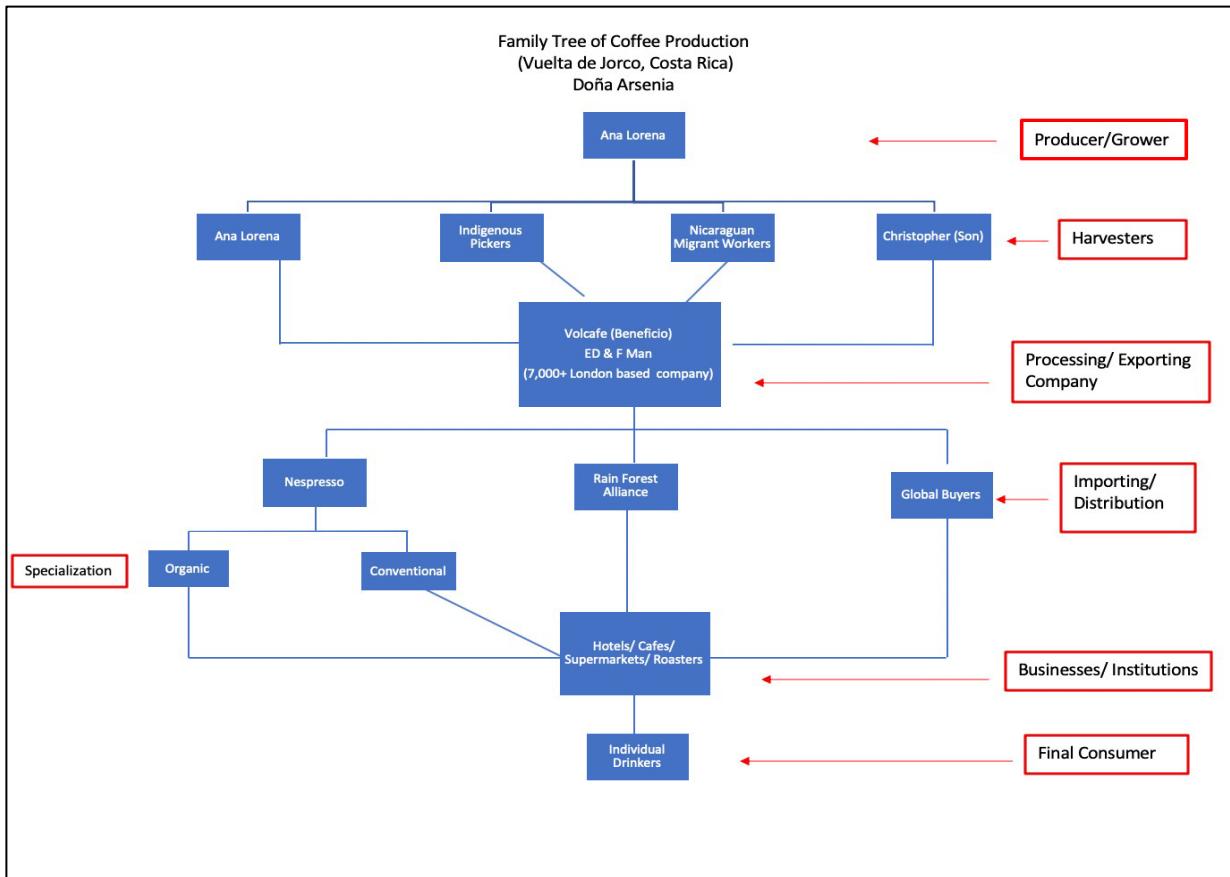


Figure 4. Doña Arsenia's Coffee Trajectory

When coffee prices are below the cost of production, (which they mostly are) small holders are affected most, and they pay the greatest price of sacrifice. The coffee commodity chain is not so much a sequential chain as it is a hierarchy, and privilege trickles down from the top—from those in the consumption sphere. Doña Arsenia believes that the two main reasons why small holders receive hardly anything for their coffee is 1) because of their lack of resources (equipment, market access, direct buyers, or actor autonomy) and 2) because between the instant the small holder sells the coffee cherries to the instant that the coffee reaches consumers' lips, the coffee has gone through at least four people's and with each transfer, money is being made and each actor needs their cut. The price gets dispersed and diluted and the small holders and final consumers are the ones having to pay. The further away people are from the hands that produced the coffee, the more revenue is made. These people are the *beneficios*, the traders, the marketers, the micro roasters, the café owners, and the individual drinkers—all who control the coffee industry and all who might be sipping away in ignorance or in obliviousness to the livelihoods of the small holders.

If actors in the consumption sphere were aware of, and even *more* so, if they even cared about the struggles small holders have faced for decades to consistently cover the costs of producing coffee and make a profit, then perhaps actions might take place to improve the conditions for increasing farm profitability for small holders. As studies from the SCA claim, “the acceleration of climate change and rural development in recent years only increases the pressure they [small holders] experience” (Montagnon, 2017). Doña Arsenia realizes the disparate spheres of production and consumption and the lack of information about the existing dynamics within both. She claims:

We cannot speak about what we do not see. But I am going to continue with my work, my effort and my sacrifice. It is the only way. The only way to go forward is with my work. (2019)

Furthermore, it is not entirely the responsibility of small holders to increase their own coffee profitability, because they cannot afford to take risks. Each harvest is crucial for their revenue to begin the maintenance needed for the next harvest. Julia asserts that the small holders are afraid of change:

They [small holders] are people who are afraid of change. Or they are afraid to risk something new. Maybe because they are afraid of change or they feel they are not capable of doing something different, or if someone does do something different, it won’t work out well. People do not have hope; I do have faith. Change will not be seen if we keep on like this. You will see that we need to make changes, and we will have to see what kind of change is necessary to have different results. (2019)

Doña Arsenia claims that the biggest problem in coffee in Costa Rica is that most small holders, or at least in her community of Valle Central, do not want to learn more about the coffee system, or change the current process. The small holders she describes, many whom are formally uneducated, simply perform the cultivation process that they have generationally known (planting, fertilizing, trimming, and harvesting). After their coffee is bought, they repeat the process. If this situation Doña Arsenia recounts is true, then Julia’s observation of the small holders unwilling to take risks because the consequences are too high makes sense. The coffee industry cannot afford to ignore the risks and crises involved (and increasingly growing) in coffee production on such a global scale, even if the form it takes is still evolving. However, what is for certain is that the evidence of the struggles of small holders is mainly anecdotal and

thus, invisible to the macro consumers and the individual drinkers who, alternatively, might consider quantitative models more seriously. As anthropologists Ferguson and Li claim:

Surveys can be very effective at assessing resources that are already in some sense socially standardized (like formal sector occupational categories, the amount of a monthly pay check, or the size of a legally surveyed and titled landholding), but the diffuse and improvised labor that underlies so many small-scale and intimate forms of direct resource transfer [such as coffee production for small holders] requires methodological access to a whole social way of life that only ethnography can provide. (2018)

The connections between the consumption and production spheres are often inconceivable and often devoid of cross spherical perspectives. Ethnography, however, has long paid productive attention to the disruptions and incoherencies that amass around and within capitalist projects (Appel, 2015). Ethnography thus has the potential to address the production and labor ethics of small holders that are often difficult to imagine in a global economy. As one small holder states:

The consumer just arrives and drinks the coffee, not seeing the complicated and hard work. Coffee production is more complicated than just images of the countryside, gathering coffee in a full basket because to have this basket full requires effort. It causes illnesses because often one gets sick from getting wet or staying up all night or going to bed late due to work and getting up early to go back to work. It is not just a cup of coffee or a healthy-looking countryside. (2019)

## 5.8 Intergenerational Environmental Sustainability

*“Organic is a word that many people use but do not do.” – Ricardo Ortiz, youth small holder.*

Other ethical values attached to ways of life for some small holders begin with environmental sustainability. Some even argue that environmental sustainability is the most important terrain to demonstrate ethical practices. Coffee production is not possible without attention to ecological components such as soil, fertilizers, and biodiversity; yet somehow, the desperation to produce high yields and secure profits occupies the minds of many small holders, and the environment is neglected. Two youth small holders who prioritize environmental sustainability, Ricardo and Maria Ortiz, lay out its definition:

A system that is organic—abstaining from pesticide/herbicide/insecticide/ use—a system that does not remove something from the land. We have trees that give fruit for the

animals, and we eat this same fruit. We live with the animals. It does not bother us if the squirrels eat our bananas or squash, because we can consume them too. So, sustainable for me is when a person lives harmoniously with the environment of production. (Ricardo, 2019)

Ricardo claims that many small holders in his community always talk about “sustainability” and advocate that what they are doing is a “sustainable practice,” but often times they do not actually practice that. Ricardo’s definition of sustainable requires that an entire ecosystem be organic and functioning healthily as a whole. He defines organic as anything produced without the use of chemicals. Similarly, Ricardo’s younger sister Maria states:

Sustainable production means good management of natural resources. When we look for sustainable production, what we intend is economic and social support but without setting aside the environment. If you wish to have sustainable production it means taking into consideration resources such as soil, water, microorganisms, that is, all that surrounds the microenvironment that could be harmed. You see sustainable development as a future for future generations... that they might have the same resources we do. (Maria, 2019)

Maria refers to sustainability as a development that is capable of covering today’s needs for an intact environment, social justice, and economic prosperity, without limiting the ability of future generations to meet their needs. She believes that the preservation of the natural environment is prerequisite for a well-functioning economy and social justice. It is crucial to understand that sustainability is not only centered on the environmental impact, but also on the future. Ricardo and Maria also hint that many small holders do not entirely know what “organic” or “sustainability” is, and thus, throw the terms around as adjectives that supposedly describe their “ethical” work. Ricardo and Maria view the terms “sustainability” and “organic” as nouns—as tangible goals for their production practices.

### **Ricardo Ortiz**

**San Miguel, Valle Occidental, Costa Rica**

*Journal Excerpt July 25th, 2019*

Ricardo is 24 years old—considered a youth in the coffee industry—and is a split-time small holder and university student. He studies forest science—the study of trees and the systems they are part of (including coffee)—and agronomy—the study of soils. These two technical specialties complement one another, especially for what Ricardo is interested in: flourishing

biodiversity of a healthy ecosystem and sustainable production methods through the implementation of organic fertilizers.

Ricardo is one of six children; however, only he and Maria are invested in the family's coffee. Maria is also a student at the university specializing in cultural resource management. Their family owns 2 hectares of land, which mainly grows coffee, but they also grow corn, beans, limes, and mangos. Having a variety of plant species is good for the nutrients in the soil, and the canopy of shade is good for the coffee and over-all health of ecosystem. Their mother inherited their *cafetal*—coffee plot—from their grandparents, who were also small holders. They built their house on the coffee land. Their mother is a stay-at-home mom who cooks, cleans, and raises their younger siblings. Their father does not actually tend to their family's coffee because he has a different, more profitable job at the chicken factory nearby. Since the family does have that much land (2 hectares, which yields about 15-40 *fanegas* annually depending on the season), they cannot rely on coffee as a main source of income, thus, only Ricardo and his uncle sustain the coffee labor. Ricardo and Maria have chosen not to abandon the family's coffee, while also realizing the importance of education, which is why both study forestry, agronomy, and cultural resources. The health of the coffee plants is the most important focus for Ricardo, which is why he cares so much about soil and the environment—the foundation for a sustainable coffee producing environment.

Ricardo reels off the three options available for selling coffee: two *cooperativas* and one *beneficio*. Ricardo sells his family's coffee to the *beneficio* called Orlich. Ricardo explains that Orlich sells its coffee to Nespresso—an operating unit of the global Nestlé company based in Switzerland, the world's largest food and beverage company. Nespresso—a large actor in the coffee pod revolution—manufactures coffee machines accompanied with small aluminum capsules filled with ground coffee to make instant espressos. With single-use pods and one push of a button, convenience and accessibility to espressos without having to leave the house or office has never been possible before. Additionally, the target consumers are Europeans and Americans, who are prime candidates for engaging with innovation of new coffee brewing products. However, Ricardo explains that he is not so interested in knowing who the final drinkers are, but rather in whether his *beneficio* implements good environmental practices. Ricardo explains that he is content with his *beneficio*—Orlich—because it is partnered with Rainforest Alliance, the certification body that ensures sustainable and organic environmental

practices from its small holder farms, while also guaranteeing a 40% price premium on its coffee because it is essentially “organic” and “quality” (Nespresso, 2018).

However, Ricardo neglects the fact that Nespresso collaborated with Rainforest Alliance after receiving criticism for creating non-recyclable aluminum capsules without recycling facilities which resulted in environmental waste. According to a Swiss business new site, Nestlé did not implement any recycling programs outside of a few in Switzerland (one of Nespresso’s biggest buyers), and that only 24.6% of Nespresso’s capsules are recycled globally (Atkins & Daneshku, 2017). Nespresso launched a program called "écolaboration" to try to remedy the problem. A sustainability program was launched as "The Positive Cup" under the Nespresso AAA Sustainable Quality Program, which was developed in collaboration with Rainforest Alliance. The Rainforest Alliance initiative focused on helping farmers who grow and supply Nespresso’s coffee by claiming it does so by teaching small holders’ best business and growing practices. Nespresso sources 40 percent of its coffee from Rainforest Alliance certified farms (Nespresso, 2020).

When asked about the validity of Rainforest Alliance’s claim of only sourcing from farms that meet its certification standards, Ricardo explains that Nespresso supplies each of Orlich’s members with a binder full of instructional documents. These documents include correct harvesting process to follow, quality standards to meet, record keeping of volume and fertilizer use, etc. to ensure that Orlich’s members are upholding these criteria to qualify as a “Rainforest Alliance” and “organic” certified farms. The incentive is that these farms get paid more per *fanega*, since certification requires more time and money to reach its standards (see Section 1.3). Ricardo states that Orlich pays \$184 USD per *fanega*, which is higher than the prices Julia and Doña Arsenia’s receive. However, this pricing difference makes sense since Ricardo is meeting “organic” and other certification standards. Therefore, neither the knowledge of the consumers at the end of the commodity chain, the desire to sell coffee to a direct market, nor the lack of “just” pricing is of utmost importance to Ricardo whose sole aim is to create and implement organic fertilizers for his own use and that of his community.

However, the more I talk with Ricardo, the more gaps I notice in Nespresso/Rainforest Alliance’s sustainability initiative. For example, while going through the binder of paperwork, I ask if any employees from Nespresso conduct site visits to check up on their small holder farms. Ricardo says, “never, but sometimes the people from Orlich [the local beneficio] do” (2019). The

lack of follow-up presents problems because either Orlich does not have enough human resources to check certification standards, or Nespresso/Rainforest Alliance is neglecting certain farms, which consequently means that the *beneficio* is not consistently ensuring that its small holders are maintaining these standards. Thus, the binder full of certification instructions and requirements quickly becomes a work of fiction, which it already is since Ricardo claims that representatives have not checked up on his family's *cafetal* in years. It seems that if small holders truly use only organic products, they do so because they have a genuine interest in preserving the environment. If small holders only care about securing the highest yields possible, they can revert to pesticides and chemicals without consequence since Nespresso/Rainforest Alliance and Orlich are not surveilling small holder practices. In reality, Nespresso and other Rainforest Alliance certifications are a mix of organic practices. It would be extremely difficult for these companies to claim that they are 100% organic. Additionally, it seems ethically irresponsible that Nespresso, although claiming to be partnered with Rainforest Alliance and to advocate for environmental conservation, continues to package small amounts of coffee into expensive aluminum pods and manufacture more coffee brewing machines for these wasteful capsules, all the while failing to conduct thorough certification checks on their small holder producer suppliers. For Ricardo, ethical responsibility means:

More than anything, it means to take care of the *cafetal* [coffee plot], to cultivate it well so that the plants give coffee. Coffee production is very hard, it's something complicated and we, fortunately, are working organically, or rather semi-organically. We are trying to use organic excrement so that the land is more profitable, and so that we don't spend so much money [on chemical fertilizers]. It is also necessary to change the coffee varietals—something we have not yet done but are intending to do this year—sow varieties and better the quality—if these turn out to be *roya* [fungus] resistant. (2019)

Ricardo's domain for ethical behavior has everything to do with ensuring that his coffee farm—and the farms in his community—prioritize the health of the environment by abstaining from chemical and pesticide use. Ricardo sees the long-term impacts that repeated chemical use has on the health of the soil, which is the most important component in growing healthy coffee and supporting an entire ecosystem (humans included). Ricardo adopts an approach coined by ecologist Neil Carter and other contributing authors called “coupled humans and natural systems” (CHANS) (Carter et al., 2014). The approach integrates combined social and environmental perspectives to understand how people and wildlife are interlinked together by

mechanisms that may weaken or strengthen those linkages (Carter et al., 2014). Ricardo believes that meeting the needs for a human population, specifically his community of small holders, presents a sustainability challenge for the environment, and thus states that:

It would be best to inform my community that the organic products work, and that they are better than chemical products. Organic products better the quality of the soil because soils are very depleted in this zone. I try to explain and give information about using organic products that better the soil and renders the coffee more profitable. (2019)

However, Ricardo also notes the immediate need for small holders to produce high yielding coffee harvests. He recognizes the short-term economic gain through the use of chemicals, but that in the end, chemical use will not resolve anything but rather create more enduring problems. Ricardo explains how small holders in his community reject the use of organic products because their use requires more work. Many small holders attempting to work with organic products have unrealistic expectations. For example, by using organics, small holders would expect to have their coffee plants cured of fungus with the same potency of chemicals. A single application of chemicals may be sufficient to combat *roya*—stem rust—, but organic products require 1-2 years of consistent application if one wants to see results; thus, many small holders discontinue the use of organic products because of the extra labor time required and the delayed results. Ricardo claims that many small holders desire higher prices or greater profit for their coffee—the recurring narrative for most small holders—which is a reason why they cannot afford to have pests and fungus sabotaging their harvest with weaker support from organic products. Chemical application is a safer bet.

Ricardo assures me that “production is complicated,” and he shares an experience about his *cafetal* being so depleted of soil nutrients that he could not sow coffee. He claims “for two years, the grasses invaded and choked the roots of plants— we lost everything. I realized it was a process of improving the soil.” Ricardo converted to organic-only fertilizers, even fermented some of his own, and now he reaps the fruit of a teeming *cafetal* full of healthy coffee and flourishing biodiversity. Ricardo looks to the soil as one of the indicators for healthy coffee. He states:

I can see the little bugs in the soil again. At night, I see the nocturnal animals, and in the morning, I see the field rodents eating a guava. Birds are also a very important biological indicator because they can easily move from one poor environmental location to a good

one. They are the best way to evaluate the health of an ecosystem. We have seen a change in common bird species, and now we can identify more species from when we began organics. I did an inventory of 20 species, and now there are 60. This brings me joy—to have coffee giving abundant quantity, while also seeing new species. (2019)

Essentially, Ricardo's approach demonstrates the interconnectedness between people and wildlife—how each impacts the other and consequently helps prevent further environmental degradation. When asked if he—or other small holders—would ever sell their *cafetales* due the continuous and increasing threats of low prices and depleted soil, Ricardo exclaims, “Never! Our *cafetal* is all we have and each one of us has a little piece of the land. Our land is our little forest where you can hear the sound of birds. Without coffee you cannot hear this. You would have to go far to find a place like this—a little piece of paradise” (2019). According to Ricardo's statement, and according to the observed fact that small holders continue to cultivate coffee whether chemically or organically, coffee is valued as a form of cultural wealth that is worth keeping through the highs and lows. Coffee appears to have a similar purpose as do Lesotho cattle in anthropologist James Ferguson's, “The Bovine Mystique.” In Lesotho, cattle ownership was the most important asset to maintain for economic purposes, but more importantly, for social purposes. Even in a drought or famine, no one would consider selling their cattle. One interviewee stated, “you cannot eat money, so why would you sell your cattle for money? (Ferguson, 1985).

Coffee unlocks more than a monetary value for small holders. Note how Ricardo speaks about value. When asked about how many *fanegas* his land would produce in a good season, Ricardo responds “about 30;” however, this particular season (2019) he expects about 15-20 *fanegas* because of the *roya*. Ricardo does not seem extremely concerned about the lower yields because 1) coffee is not his family's main source of income and 2) the money Ricardo receives from his coffee is spent on things such as materials for attending the university. Ricardo casually mentions that the laptop he needs to purchase will cost him about 2 *fanegas*. Coffee used to be called “café oro”—or the golden bean—in the past because it was used as currency. Ricardo, a youth small holder in contemporary times, still conceives of money in terms of coffee value. Coffee of course, serves as a means to a livelihood, but in Ricardo's case, coffee results in access to education.

Education is important to Ricardo: first for individual purposes in advancing his knowledge about agronomy and forestry, and second, for community purposes in teaching the

small holders about the importance of using organic products. Ricardo's goals as a student and small holder are to incorporate organic products in his *cafetal*, educate his community members about the necessity in using organic products, demonstrate the process of effectively applying organic products, and finally, to create his own organic products from his own *cafetal*. Julia Gonzalez also stresses the importance of education as a way to understand more about the anatomy of coffee as part of a living ecosystem, rather than just as a commodity. She claims:

It is important to educate ourselves as to what we actually have at hand in coffee. It's not that I take a plant and sow this plant simply because I have it without knowing why I sowed this plant. Progress is focused on what I as producer do to take care of, to produce quality in my coffee—to know what chemical I am applying to the coffee and if it has a function or not. Progress is something more, it's knowing something technically about coffee but also cultivating it in a conscious way. (2019)

Small holders seem to want to know more about production process—sustainable ones—but there is a lack of knowledge and resources. As Doña Arsenia mentions, “here [her community] everyone grows coffee, but they don't know much about it. We only know that our coffee goes to the *beneficio*.” Sunghee Tark, CEO of Bean Voyage—the nonprofit that provides training for youth and women small holders in Costa Rica, states:

Small holders we work with want to really understand more about the coffee that they are producing, which is really ironic because their families have been producing it for generations. They are looking at the market to tell them what they are producing. Obviously, they [small holders] are participating in trainings because they want to improve the quality of their coffee, but they also want to have more agency over the product that they have (2019).

Ricardo pursues education to learn more about the systems required to produce sustainable coffee. Ricardo's specific knowledge revolves around “organic” production, which is not so commonly practiced. The majority of the coffee industry is chemical based. According to the World of Organic Agriculture, only 6.5 percent of the world's coffee production is under organic management (Amudavi et al., 2020). Ricardo explains that the small holders in his community, even some of his uncles, are very close minded and do not believe that organic products work. Youth small holders across other coffee producing regions in Costa Rica experience resistance from the older generations. Ximena Vargas, a teenage small holder from the Guanacaste region, claims that “the youth have tools and creativity. They are open to learning whereas adults

concentrate on one thing or have been raised in a way that limits them. It is important to learn to interact and dialogue across both generations because this dialogue supports many ideas”

(Ximena, 2019).

Thus, another challenge Ricardo works against is enduring generational beliefs. Maria discusses how the historical emergence of chemicals was seen as a solution for the fungus and pests in agriculture for many small holders, but now the environment is seeing the effects that those chemicals have had on the soil (Maria, 2019). Maria claims:

We did not have the same plagues today that we had a few years ago. In our times, we have new plagues and diseases. Funguses are even more common and are getting stronger and stronger—gaining strength against the chemicals. Also, chemicals may target one species, for example, only flies, but when you use it, the chemicals seep into the ground. Perhaps a worm eats it, and the chemicals go into it too. So, here's the point: understand that chemicals are a solution of the moment, but in the long term, they bring many many consequences. If people see it this way, especially if small holders make their livelihoods this way, they can initiate an organic culture, implementing it more over time, little by little, beginning to help the environment. (Maria 2019)

The benefits of using organic products are many. First, small holders can create organic products from the vegetation and fruits of their own farms, thus saving money by not having to invest in fertilizers and chemicals. Second, organic products are harmless to the ecosystem and will restore nutrients into the soils and regenerate surrounding biodiversity—all good for sustainable healthy coffee. Finally, if in theory, one's farm can be certified as organic, then they could receive a higher price per *fanega* from the *beneficio*. Yet, despite the many benefits that organic products yield, Ricardo claims, “they [small holders] do not have faith and they will not learn—no one does anything.” Ricardo suggests that the small holders cannot visualize nor comprehend the benefits without looking past the extra work needed to create and implement organic products. As political economist, Elinor Ostrom claims, “self-organizing to sustain a resource costs time, and the effort can result in a loss of short-term economic gains” (Ostrom, 2009). Ricardo claims that the biggest challenge confronting small holders that do not want to adopt the organic process is the requirement of patience and labor. The efforts to apply organic products are indeed more laborious for small holders, who already struggle under the weight of demanding year-long work required in coffee production. Ricardo explains that small holders complain that they do not have enough time to convert to organic products. Ricardo states that

organic products are as effective as chemicals; however, they must be applied 10x more. Small holders do not want to commit to this. Ricardo explains:

Organic fertilizing takes more work because you have to first, create the fertilizer (which is a long process), and second, you have to spray the crops much more than if you just use pesticides which means more work. For example, on my farm [2-hectares] I apply chemical pesticides once or twice per season, but using organic fertilizers, I have to apply them 10 times per season. (2019)

Doña Arsenia too, realizes the challenges in creating and applying organic products. Like Ricardo, she is experimenting with creating her own organic fertilizer, so she does not have to buy as much synthetic fertilizer. Doña Arsenia uses an old horizontal freezer to ferment fruit, grasses, and manure. She describes her experiences:

Last week I went to the *cafetal* [coffee plot] and it was a struggle. I brought 8 sacks of horse manure. I immediately put it on the coffee plants, but I am lacking the other half. So, I am going to see if I can do *lombricultura* [worm cultivation] and apply it to another place. If I want to make another natural fertilizer, I have the idea of how to make it, but I need to bring horse manure from the mountain to make a kind of liquid, which I cover for 24 days. Then I take it and I apply it to the coffee plants. My gardens are fertilized all with chicken manure. Some of my coffee is fertilized with chicken manure (2019).

Doña Arsenia continues:

I am fighting for the best coffee. And to fight for the best coffee means that the coffee harvest does not fail—*que café no me falte*. Now I am fertilizing with natural fertilizer. I can put the chemicals on the plants, but I am trying to work with natural fertilizer; however, it is impossible because of the large number—*montón*—of *enfermedades* [diseases]. You have to control it with chemicals—I do not like this, but for the quantity of production I have to use chemical fertilizers (Arsenia, 2019).

The coffee harvest is also dependent upon climate patterns and coffee diseases. Small holders cannot control the weather, but they can mitigate some of the harmful diseases by applying chemical fertilizers. Doña Arsenia, like Ricardo, knows that application of pesticides and chemicals is good only for short-term economic gains, but eventually the biodiversity and soil will deplete which will have dire future consequences for the coffee. However, small holders often have no other option but to use pesticides and chemical fertilizers to ensure a decent harvest. Thus, to these small holders, the cost of pesticides and chemical fertilizers offsets the harvest yield, even if organic fertilizers are essentially “free.”

Ximena Vargas, a youth small holder from the Guanacaste region, cannot afford to stop applying pesticides on her family's coffee. In her community of La Sierra, *roya*—coffee rust—is ravaging a large amount of the community's coffee. Ximena and her family are currently trying to implement a plan that would eliminate the *roya*, but it requires continued pesticide use. Ximena's community contains various *barrios*—neighborhoods. Ximena's lives in barrio “Candelaria” and many of her family members live in the same *barrios*. The rest of her family lives in the neighboring *barrio*, “Campo de Oro.” About 50 families comprise both barrios and each family experiences the impact of *roya*. Ximena plans to consolidate each of these 50 families to combat *roya* by uprooting part of the infected coffee trees—segment by segment starting with the older coffee trees—and replanting the area with a different variety of coffee that has a resistance to *roya*. In conjunction with uprooting infected trees and replanting with resistant trees, the other remaining coffee plants—the younger ones that are still infected—will be treated with pesticides. Ximena does realize that pesticides must be used because without them, the *roya* will kill the entire harvest. She also realizes that some families might find it hard to uproot their coffee plants even if they are infected because they are still producing coffee; thus, she claims that pesticides must be used. If the infected coffee plants are not uprooted nor treated with pesticides, Ximena realizes that the entire experiment will fail because it only takes a small amount of *roya* to spread the contamination. For Ximena and her community, the main domain for ethical behaviors focuses on the elimination of *roya* by any means. The issues for Ximena and her community are less about finding alternative markets and receiving higher prices for their coffee, and entirely about treating the coffee fungus. Without coffee to even sell, then a market will not even matter. However, to Ricardo's point:

Obviously when a disease arrives, you must combat it with a little bit of a strong chemical, but the main idea is that you do not use 100% chemical. You want to care for the environment by eliminating that spot of *roya*—stem rust—but do not only use the harsh product, use both. (Ricardo 2019)

The strong incentive to continue chemical use because of higher yields frustrates Ricardo's desire to teach the importance of organic products for economic preservation and for a sustainable coffee future. Ricardo reiterates that change can only begin—that success can only happen—if small holders incorporate organic products even if it is *poco a poco*—little by little. Ricardo claims that “reeducating small holders is necessary. Perhaps, this won't change the

world, but such advice is a grain of sand.” Maria considers education as a conduit to inform small holders about the critical condition of the environment and as a means to economically invest back into her family and community. She claims:

One has a role, and people see you [educated youth] as a solution to many problems, as a person who has tools at hand for processes that better the environment and production in a sustainable form. People see you as someone you can lean on (2019).

Ricardo also thinks highly of education; however, he and Maria claim that a majority of their classmates who study agronomy or culture resources go into the tourist industry or work for the government because the jobs are more stable and profitable. Tourism generates almost 7% of Costa Rica’s GDP and is responsible for almost 15% of Costa Rica’s employment—an 8% growth rate over the past decade (Alvarado, 2018). Ricardo and Maria feel a pull, maybe even a pressure or expectation, to incorporate what they learn from the university to the create more sustainable production practices in their community. Ricardo desires to study in order to influence sustainable production methods on his farm and beyond. He states:

I want to visit other farms to see what quality organic production is. To see if we share similar practices. To give and take advice so that perhaps we can learn more about organic production. I have thought about publishing a book about coffee through partnering with organic farms—publishing what I learn from them (2019).

Coffee production is *muy complicado*—very complicated, but for Ricardo, sustainability must begin with the environment. As a coffee trader once said, the most difficult part about coffee is not the coffee itself, but rather the people involved. For those small holders who prioritize environmental sustainability, it is necessary to change the people before both the soil and the environment can be improved. Ricardo’s domain for ethical behavior involves his own individual and community production practices. Ricardo vaguely questions the environmental ethics of his *beneficio*, Nespresso and Orlich, realizing that he cannot control their environmental regulations. Ricardo and Maria have instead decided that it is up to them and their community to *produce* coffee ethically, sustainably, and organically. Ricardo and Maria voice a responsibility that they feel for being young actors able to give back to their family and community. Each small holder in the coffee production sphere has her own agenda, raise different concerns, challenges, goals, and dreams. Despite the seemingly dominant narrative of unjust coffee prices, and

underneath the price anxiety, small holders exercise different labor ethics depending on their own unique context.

### 5.9 Anti-Marxian Labor Ethics

In the coffee industry, economic realities raise the question of why small holders cling to coffee production even as the crop's value declines steadily and shows no profit. Many coffee farms in Costa Rica, however, have not been abandoned; thus, there must be alternative and more valued meanings involved in coffee production. The portraits of Doña Arsenia, Ricardo, Maria, Julia, Ximena, Don Eduardo, amongst other small holders I interviewed, demonstrate that critical theories of capitalism and capitalist relations cannot adequately grasp essential features of a modern capitalist society, nor I argue the new meanings and categories of "modern labor" (Postone, 1993, p.4; Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 6-7). For example, there is massive gap created between the time small holders contribute to production (the selling of their coffee) and the time they get compensated for it. There is much more going on between work and pay, and this in-between space creates a space for meaning making. What are these events? Modern capitalist society calls for the exploration of changing ways in how people think about labor in the abstract and about individual labor and the ways in which they understand labor through a more affective approach. Coffee production and the labor of small holders specifically demonstrates the changing and manifold meanings ascribed to labor that diverges from a Marxian conception.

First, these small holders *are* owners of their land, labor, and the fruits of their labor; yet, they are limited by poor access to capital and resources to capitalize on. Doña Arsenia prides herself on being a small holder and individually owning her *cafetal*. She exclaims:

*Yo soy la jefa y soy la empleada*—I am my own boss, and I am my own employee, so no one knows what is behind me. People who come to the *cafetal* imagine that there are *peones*—workers—, but not that I am the *peon*. (2019)

Small holders do not exhibit the same critical labor value that Marx places on the proletariat laborer. For example, Marx explains that the labor-power of the laborer is also a commodity in which he sells to the "owner of money," in return for money to buy even more commodities of different sorts (Tucker ed., 1978, p. 336). Given that the "money owner"—the capitalist—supplies the laborer with the resources and capital to produce, this interaction is essentially a tradeoff (Tucker ed., 1978, p. 338). However, in coffee production, there is little waged labor

and small holders' labor cannot be sold as if it were a commodity. Marx presents an overly simplified scenario between acts of exchange linking producers, commodities, and labor. Therefore, equally important questions should pertain to the changing meanings and value of work in modern society and amongst small holders (Ferguson & Li, 2018). On this topic, I argue that Laura Bear, a professor of economic anthropology, makes a distinction between work and labor.

Secondly, Marx "wrongly subsumes all forms of work into labor, thereby unintentionally valorizing the never-ending and meaningless natural cycle of production and consumption" (Bear, 2013). In a traditional Marxian framework, labor is utilized through the centralization and concentration of the means of production, the separation of ownership and management, and the constitution and concentration of an industrial proletariat (wages, hours, quantitative results, collective workers, institutions, etc.), while Bear tends to reference work as something more personal (Postone, 1993). Thus, it can be argued that small holders do not labor in the same way in which Marx characterizes it. Small holders cannot be classified as laborers, but perhaps they can be classified as workers—workers who often do not get paid for their work, but instead ascribe a different sort of value to it. When asked what the most valuable thing about coffee production represents, Julia answers:

The value is in the relationships and in the feeling or sense of life because around a cup of coffee there can be many things. You could go out with friends and order a cup of coffee. Not only consuming coffee—but also to work in the coffee fields is to create an environment, to have *convivencia*—“living together”—with other people. From production to final consumption coffee creates a *convivencia* with others and it permits relationships with others. (2019)

Doña Arsenia similarly claims that if coffee's value is not in its economic profitability, value is found, “in the sense of life.”

To be happy. It's very simple. I produce this. It is a good sentiment. I sowed a bunch of *chayote*—squash—and now I do not have to buy them. And my coffee is also *my* coffee. To see its beauty, to see it clean, to see it bearing fruit. This is what bring me the most joy (2019).

Small holders' work creates meaningful connections to cultural, historical and familial ties. Small holders have come to value labor—or work—as a means in of itself, instead of valuing labor as means for an end—a commodity. The portraits of small holders expand discourse on

labor as a method and site of value. There is no denying that social wealth and material wealth is, to some extent, created by human labor, and that in capitalism, “labor underlies the nonconscious, automatic, and market-mediated mode of distribution,” but now labor has also taken on different meanings and different values (Postone, 1993, p. 8).

Thirdly, Marx’s analysis acknowledges neither the uniqueness of labor as the source of value nor the distinction between "real wealth" (or "material wealth") and value (Postone, 1993, p. 8). Traditional capitalism values labor for its ability to produce valuables as in tangible, material wealth to be bought, sold, and/or exchanged, while modern society values labor as something treasured for its ability to generate wealth in intangible ways. Small holders demonstrate an analysis of labor constituted by and for the ethical, meaningfulness, metaphysical, and communal categories. These different values ascribed to work exclude the Marxian view of labor as an object (something to be owned), instead they adopt the view that labor is an activity signifying the living source of value. In other words, labor is a value-positing activity (Postone, 1993, p. 59). For example, Ricardo describes the value of his work as an indicator of success. He states:

Success is being satisfied with what you do. If a person loves what he is doing, he has it all. Sincerely, if one does not love what he is doing, he is not successful nor happy. You have to feel happy or you will produce a lot without feeling the labor of what you are doing. If you are not happy each day is a waste of time. Some in the coffee industry might say this is garbage, but there are also people like us [Ricardo and Maria] that strive to better the coffee crop by organics. Some years it comes out good and others bad, but we move ahead little by little (2019).

The circumstances for the emergence and establishment of “ethics” are through a specific kind of workplace—one in which the work process emphasizes the achievement of an act of work rather than the production of a commodity (Bear, 2013, p.172). Ricardo is able to exercise his ethical beliefs through the implementation of organic products. Julia is able to exercise her ethical beliefs by investigating the values of a *cooperativa* to try to fix her own. Ximena exercises her ethical beliefs by organizing her community to band together to combat *roya*. The workplace and consequently labor, becomes a site of “ethics.” The archaic model of labor, posited by Marx and analyzed by modern social theorists, cannot distinguish between the changing forms and meanings that modern society places on human labor. Not only does Marx’s conception of labor exhibit qualitative inadequacy, but it is also too categorical (Postone, 1993, p. 7). In this vein,

Chakrabarty and Bear posit a different analysis on traditional social thought. Their analyses take on a hermeneutic approach which engages a “loving grasp of detail in search of an understanding of the diversity of human-life worlds” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 18). Chakrabarty labels the gap in abstract Marxist theory as one that obstructs human belonging and diversity, and thus focuses on the politics of those two. “Hermeneutic analysis includes affective histories that demonstrate how human belonging where life forms, although porous to one another, do not seem exchangeable through a third term of equivalence such as abstract labor or even money” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 71). Doña Arsenia tells me that she lived in San Jose for 30 years maintaining 3 different jobs. She describes how she needed change. “I came to this farm very sick. I was sick with depression, anxiety, stress, problems with my husband...*café me da vida*—coffee gives me life.” Coming back to work in the *cafetal* gave Doña Arsenia a life and provides for her a life—a purpose, a dream, a passion. She talks about the unsalaried labor, and also about the pain in the struggle of working on the farm, but ultimately, Doña Arsenia chooses this life because coffee brings her tranquility and happiness and there is nowhere else in this world that she would rather be and nothing else she would rather be absorbed in. She says coffee cured her of all these things. Ricardo also says, “we produce coffee for tradition’s sake, and it comes from the heart.” These small holder portraits investigate forms of labor where ethics can be accounted for, valued, and sometimes even constitutive of labor itself. The investigation into small holders’ conceptions of ethics takes seriously the questions of diverse ways of being and living in the world in ways that Marx does not account for.

Finally, a Marxist capitalist theory involving capitalist relations is far too simple to be adequate. A Marxist framework that lays out relations between “A” (capitalist) and “B” (laborer) is not enough. In the coffee industry, it is noted that there exists not only the small holder and the capitalist/*beneficio/cooperativa*, but there is an entire web of actors interacting with each other. Another variable, “C,” needs to be implanted where “C” represents mediators, entrepreneurs, or intermediaries. “C” can either take advantage of conflict or create conflict between “A” and “B” and align interests of “A” and/or “B” with her own. Much like middlemen in the coffee commodity chain who raise the price of the coffee the further away it gets from its production origin. “C” also creates more efficiency in the market and allows for its expansion by adopting niche roles such as those intermediary roles involved in importing, exporting, transporting, etc. Each niche within the coffee commodity chain has its own diverse groups of actors, each with

different interests, socio-economic status, jobs, values, and ethics. Marx's analysis cannot contain the complexity and the reality of social interactions operating within modern society.

Marxian interpretations of labor cannot anticipate the significance of alternative values and cannot capture the experiences or ethics of work because they contain their own narrow secular and materialist ethical framings (Bear, 2013, p. 176). Small holders engage in particular forms of labor. This labor has taken on new meanings. It increasingly reflects how they think about themselves, how they instill communal belonging, how they relate to one another, how they form personal—even moral—values, how they construct collective goals, how they occupy gender roles, how they maintain historical and cultural identity—all things absent in and inadequate for Marxian construct. The production of labor then becomes an activity, a site, a way for meaning making or creating meaningfulness in life. This is the ethics of small holder labor—modern labor.

Although the portraits of small holders demonstrate the changing values and meanings ascribed to labor, the wealth of that labor manifests differently in each small holder's life. There are differences in the ethical behaviors small holders engage even in the production sphere, even in the same country, and even in the same community. For example, Doña Arsenia has no desire to investigate or strengthen the values and governing structures of her community's *cooperativa*. She would rather search for, or at least dream of, creating her own *micro beneficio*. Julia has no desire to begin a *micro beneficio*. She would rather study the laws of *cooperativas*. Julia claims, "I am a believer in community development; I believe in local government and that the way to go is to have everyone united." Doña Arsenia alternatively states:

I am just battling here to take care of my crops. If there are laws, I do not know them. I am not interested. I have to eat. I have to know who will bring the fertilizers, and where to get my money to pay for the fertilizers for the *roya*. So, if I start thinking about what the government could do for me...it will do nothing for me (2019).

Neither small holder is incorrect nor even conflicting with each other. Each just demonstrates her own individual engagements and values through her labor ethics. Some choose to think broadly and aim to for structural change, while others choose to think narrowly and aim for individual or community change. Ricardo, for example, purely cares about the soil and organic fertilizers. He strives to produce his own organic fertilizers and convince his community to implement them. Small holders all unite under the umbrella of issues that they experience and relate to, such as

unjust prices. These portraits then challenge the idea that small holders are not structurally dependent on waged labor. An outcome of this independence is that small holders are often embroiled in contestation around interests in the labor process, characteristic of the capitalist economy generally, but which takes a specific form in the coffee industry (Wood, 2008). The portraits of small holders demonstrate that the value surrounding coffee for each small holder is different and each terrain for ethically conceived labor practices and behaviors is different. These portraits of Doña Arsenia, Julia, Ricardo, Maria, Don Eduardo, and the thousands of other small holders bring together desire and labor—labor, which is neither leisurely, monetarily compensated, nor economically profitable. For small holders to desire this sort of labor seems an unexpected move, which also challenges the Marxian capitalist lineage. However, this desire, amongst other sentiments and factors, influences and reifies small holders' commitment to the struggles that they encounter historically, presently, and perhaps indefinitely.

### **Part III: The Consumption Sphere**

Thus far, this research has investigated conceptions of ethics and experiences of labor from the perspectives of small holders. In chapters 1-5, I have explored the history of coffee production in Costa Rica, established the methodology and positionality from which this research stems, situated the cultural context of the specialty coffee industry, investigated the relationships between small holders and other small holders, small holders and *cooperativas/beneficios*, and small holders and their local governments/communities, and discussed changing and multiple ways that labor ethics are practiced. However, relational ethics have not yet been explored between coffee actors and the individual drinkers in the consumption sphere, nor between individual drinkers and small holders. In other words, ethics of perceived and conceived consumption and production behaviors need to be explored in relation to one another. The ethical framework has laid out the conceptions and experiences of small holders in the sphere of production before the coffee even reaches the consumption market, and now what follows, is the investigation of the same conceptions and experiences from coffee retailers, roasters, café owners, and individual drinkers.

The coffee commodity chain is interrelated and what actors in the consumption sphere believe enforces what they practice which ripples into the production sphere of small holders.

As Roseberry points out, if people do not know where a product comes from, much less will they “be aware of the processes, or the people, of connection and disconnection in which they are participating” (Roseberry, 1996, p. 773). For example, in US consumer society there is a great lack of knowledge about the processes behind the things we consume: the materials comprising the chair you are sitting in, the hardware illuminating the screen you are looking at, even the origins of the last meal sitting in your stomach. The majority of the time, consumers do not think about the processes and people behind the commodities that they consume. As Doña Arsenia claims, “we cannot speak about what we do not see.” Her observation alludes to the mystification and overshadowing of small holder discourse and realities. Especially since coffee is one of those commodities repeatedly and consistently bought and consumed (146 million cups were consumed in the US in 2019), coffee is indeed “the beverage of US capitalism” (Jimenez 1995, qtd. in Roseberry, 1996 p. 770).

Thus, let us return to the consumption sphere—perhaps inside a Starbucks with its walls plastered with romanticized coffee production images and its menu featuring \$5 pumpkin spice lattes. What are the *conceived* ethical behaviors and practices of the coffee actors (retailers, roasters, café owners, and drinkers) within this sphere? What are the *conceived* struggles and transgressions that occupy the realities of *their* everyday lives? Additionally, how do small holders *perceive* the consumers that drink their coffee?

## Chapter 6: The Beverage of Post-Modernism

When talking about the coffee actors in the consumption sphere (the buyers, traders, sellers, marketers/advertisers, certification bodies, roasters, baristas, and business/café owners) who also create livelihoods through coffee in the consumption sphere, we must consider those in powerful positions who control the flow and content of knowledge in the specialty coffee industry. Some of these particular actors consciously, or with self-maximizing intent, set out to persuade other coffee consumers that they need, or should buy, their specific product through misleading advertising and false ethical claims. This approach fails to draw attention to the unplanned, unintended, vicious spiral through which supply and demand are usually and continuously linked (Mennel, 1996, p. 321). This unawareness by coffee drinkers, many of whom are excluded from the knowledge and struggles involved in coffee production is paired with the conscious action on

part of certain coffee actors involved in trade and retail—those who persuade customers to consume certain products while ignoring the histories and avoiding the transparency of narratives. This unawareness leaves aside the questioning from the highly specific consumption niches the comprise the coffee industry, which can create and perpetuate unethical, harmful and capitalist (surplus maximizing) behavior.

The implication of the partial (incomplete) marketing narratives, the non-questioning of coffee production consumption processes, and the neglect by consumers of the historical context in the specialty coffee industry positions the coffee drinker front and center stage, directly under the spot light, while the small holders sit hidden in the shadows watching the stage with its curtain not even drawn back, thus invisible to the consumer behaviors representative in the specialty coffee market. The specialty coffee industry has become individualized and self-maximizing, suggesting that we are entering a “me generation” (Roseberry, 1996, p. 755). The critical “me-oriented” questions consumers will ask: “is the café ambiance suitable to my liking? Is the product consistent with my lifestyle? Does it fill a need? Do I like how it tastes? What will it cost me? Is it necessary? Can I afford it?” (Roseberry, 1996, p. 755).

From these questions, actors in the specialty coffee industry are encouraged to design an array of coffee products, drinks, and experiences to cater to certain socio-economic classes and to appeal to various consumer niches. The specialty coffee industry has no shortage of customers since there is such a broad pool of consumer preferences and profiles to draw from. Coffee consumption has grown exponentially, and coffee has become the paramount beverage of a growing consumer society. With such increase in consumption, the reshaping of the coffee market began to emerge and the interweaving of lives from various economic backgrounds and social classes brought together the different spheres and actors in the same space and the same time, regardless of whether knowledge about one of the other was equally shared. However, since the attention generated in the coffee specialty market tend to appeal more to the consumer experience than to the small holder experience, the consumer behaviors, the market trends, and the specialty café culture tend to conceal or ignore, almost perfectly, any trace of origin of the labor processes that produced the coffee, or the social relations implicated in its production (Harvey, 1989, pp. 299- 300).

In an influential essay on the global cultural economy, Arjun Appadurai has suggested the emergence of a new “fetishism of the consumer” and claims that commodity flows and

marketing strategies “mask the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer and the many forces that constitute production.... The consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best, a chooser” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 307). Analyzing and exploring the historical processes and current trends of specialty coffee marketing and consumption appear to support Appadurai’s understanding of consumer fetishism, where consumers are exposed to seemingly endless coffee choices from brand name, to roast color, to country of origin, to espresso drink type—all customized choices catered to consumer preference.

## 6.1 Freedom to Choose

Ultimately, participants in the coffee consumption sphere are autonomous individuals, since they have a level of control over their actions and make the final purchasing choice from the many available options. As demonstrated, small holders remain limited in choice in assessing who to sell their coffee to, in negotiating prices for their coffee, and in knowing about the changes that have unfolded in consumer behaviors regarding the specialty coffee industry. Contrastingly, coffee drinkers can be agents and not just consumers—agents in the specialty coffee market niche that attempt to address the realities of small holders and agents pursuing the knowledge of the historical processes that compose this arena of unfettered choices in consumption.

This is not to say that we consumers act in the market as mere automatons; we definitely have and exercise choices, and we have more things to choose from than we once did (especially regarding the specialty coffee industry). However, we exercise those choices in a world of structured and interconnected relationships, and part of what those relationships structure—or shape—is both the specialty coffee market industry and the processes of choice itself (Roseberry, 1996, p. 770). These structured relationships between actors within the consumption sphere and relationships between actors across consumption and production spheres represent their interdependencies in the coffee industry. These experiences of interrelation are not only dependent upon quite real, if mediated and unacknowledged relationships, but often the historical processes that fashioned these niches and positions within the specialty coffee industry (Roseberry, 1996, p. 770). Without both pieces of knowledge how might coffee consumers think about their connections with the rural small holders without whom their specialized choices

could not be exercised? There is more room to work on in laying out the historical process responsible for this specialty coffee market by action and demand of coffee consumers.

How might specialty coffee consumers think about the new market of choice and flexibility as not only affecting their lives, but those of the small holders? If coffee consumers are solely concerned with the technical and pleasure aspects of the specialty coffee industry and perhaps, distinguishing themselves as a certain type of coffee consumer through the specialty coffee trends and behaviors that they engage in, “they almost certainly do not imagine themselves in connection neither with other coffee consumers supplying the specialty coffee experiences nor the coffee producers who grew, cut, and picked what the specialty drinkers choose to consume” (Roseberry, 1996, p. 770). The missing link causes a disconnectedness or unawareness.

## 6.2 Consumer Ethics

Coffee actors and drinkers in the consumption sphere believe in and engage in their own forms of ethical behaviors. These behaviors are unrelated to the small holders, or rather, do not even hold significance to the small holders. Mechanisms of capitalism are outside the field of vision from the perspective of small holders at production levels and vice versa. Thus, the broad question this research investigates is how locally Bay Area-situated consumers engage with ethical consumption behaviors linking small holders to consumers. I used semi-formally structured interviews, and I completed 5 interviews with specialty coffee actors in the consumption sphere. What did I hope to learn through these interviews? I sought to discover consumption behaviors and trends that propel consumers to produce certain narratives regarding coffee production. What motivates their choices? Cheap costs, readily available options, or profit? Why do consumers buy and serve a specific coffee? What gaps contribute to the disconnect between small holder and consumer realities?

Because I was interested in experiences and opinions of “ethical” behaviors, I had to consider ways to ask questions that would elicit such responses. As I have learned from my interviews, “ethics” are slippery to define and discuss, because everyone has their own ideas and experiences. As reported by interviewee Hyejoon, a student at Harvard Business School and a part owner of her family-run specialty cafes and roastery (Bean and Bean) in New York City, “ethics are universal.” I met Hyejoon in Costa Rica and learned that she met the community rooted non-profit I worked with because she wanted to see the organization’s capacity and

impact herself before choosing to source their coffee beans. Hyejoon wanted to establish relationships with the small holders and with the organization to seek transparency in her business. She believes that the “responsibility falls on the roasters and coffee companies to source their beans ethically since we feed the pool of individual coffee drinkers,” which explains her interest in taking origin trips. For Hyejoon, “as for owning a business and studying coffee, ethics is going further into the ‘knowing’ about where the coffee we serve is coming from.” Thus, I aimed to devise questions that targeted affective sentiments that involved storytelling and anecdotal recounting rather than a formal Q & A interview per say—questions that might touch on conceptions and experiences involving “ethics.” Although Hyejoon claimed “ethics” to be universal, she continued to talk about “ethics” in a very particular way.

I used Molly Andrews’ “narrative research” method. Andrews does not so much use the term “interview” as she does “narratives.” An important challenge confronting Andrews is deciding what is or what is not relevant to one’s research agenda. For example, she states that with formal interviews, anthropologists are trained to keep focus on our own research agendas rather than attending to the variability of human emotion; however, this approach dismisses some topics as irrelevant and disables our speakers from weaving in and out of experiences of their lives (Andrews, 2007, p. 14). On the other hand, Andrews claims that personal narratives have been used as an analytic tool for trying to understand wider social phenomena. These wider social phenomena also include field contexts (cafés), and not just the people working them. I was curious about the origin stories of cafés specifically, because the stories revealed as much about the ethical positionality of a certain actor’s reasoning behind working for that particular café.

While I aimed to seek out the “personal narrative” stories of my informants through their own words, I found it challenging to investigate “ethics” without directly asking what “ethics” meant to them. For example, when I asked an employee, Adam, from a local café, Back Yard Brew, how he defined “ethical” business behavior: He responded:

That is the problem with ethics. There is no one set of books that everybody follows, so it’s relative, extremely relative—as sad as it is to say that. To some people one thing could be cheating, to others it could be a smart marketing scheme or a way to make extra money, so ethics is a big dilemma. In the industry it’s relative on who you ask what is ethical and what is not. (2019)

I suppose that by asking such direct questions, I conform to Andrews' observation that "interviewers hear only what we want to hear as it fits into our own narratives" (Andrews, 2007, p. 36). She continues, "[W]e also position ourselves to get perspectives that are partial, much like deciding who and what goes into a data sample; we shape our stories and our history, and even so far as our data," which does not seem like it should be ours to shape (36). By asking straight up questions about ethics, I realized that I was trying to shape the responses of my interlocutors to mold to my own conception of "ethics" or "non-ethics." This direct approach left my interlocutors confused, and they fumbled through abrupt and over-generalized answers.

However, at the same time, by not remaining a passive listener and instead probing deeper into the concept of "ethics" (but this time indirectly and hypothetically), I gleaned insight into what consumers might imagine as "ethical" behavior. For example, when I asked the same employee at Back Yard Brew what an "ethical" and certified (as in Fair Trade or organic) coffee trader/distributor might look like, he responded:

Somebody who is doing it the right way as they say. Someone who is following laws, regulations, following humanitarianism. They're not overstepping—using some sort of illegal labor or whatever it may be, somebody who is not cheating the system in a sense or doubling or tripling prices because they are the only distributor and just because they can. That's what I define, but it could be a completely different definition, but to me that is how I see a verified distributor. (2019)

Using the same probing tactic, I asked Terry, a coffee roaster/barista at Pachamama (a specialty café located in Sacramento), if cafés, and therefore consumers, have a responsibility to practice ethical behavior in buying practices, or to even be aware of what the coffee production sphere is like. Another consumer, who overheard the question, immediately jumped in and replied in defense of small holders needing whatever extra cents they could get because those cents directly translate into food to put on tables today and into education for kids tomorrow. Therefore, this particular consumer might claim that it is important, maybe even "ethical," to know where cafés/roasters are sourcing their coffee from and to understand why they might have to, or should, pay more for a certain type of coffee. The same consumer continued to claim that at bare minimum, consumers should definitely not haggle with lowering coffee prices or complain when prices are high. At this juncture, I presented the metaphor of an art auction, where instead of haggling and bidding for million-dollar art pieces, small holder livelihoods are at stake. This consumer questioned how the same society could fret over and pay that much money for a work

of art and not pay a few cents more for a cup of coffee. I expected the roaster Terry to agree; however, interestingly he said no. He said it was not his job as a barista to shove “ethics” down his customers’ throats. His responsibility as a barista and roaster is to plant a seed of curiosity and then water it. For example, in a brief narrative he recounts:

If one day my customer were to ask for a drip coffee, I would respond “this is a single origin honey process from Guatemala.” If the same customer comes a different day, I would then say, “this is a single origin natural process from Peru.” To a roaster, if the customers pause and ask, “hmm yesterday you said something different... so, what is this coffee today,” then the roaster states the origin story behind the coffee, and now my responsibility as a roaster and barista is done. If my customer has been hooked and actually pauses to think about the origins of the coffee being drunk, I am happy. To be curious, to ask, and then to know is how individuals should progress to practice ethical behavior (2019).

Like the Harvard business student, Hyejoon, this roaster demonstrates that perhaps the responsibility falls upon the café, the roaster, or whoever is responsible for serving a pool of customers, to serve “ethical” sourced coffee to their hundreds even thousands of customers. It is in their power, more so than individual drinkers, to source coffee “ethically,” because coffee drinkers are not usually looking for a coffee that has been sourced in an “ethical manner” any more than they are simply looking for a cup of coffee. The Pachamama roaster frames his ethical responsibility as such because it might be a turnoff to customers if their local barista or coffee shop is constantly preaching conscientious consumerism and condemning unethical behavior. The roaster claims, “small steps in the right direction should be rewarded.”

Complementing Andrews’ narrative method, anthropologist and ethnologist professors, Billy Ehn, Ovrar Lofgren, and Richard Wilk, introduce another method of using material culture—objects—to create cultural histories and life histories while engaging with interviews. These authors claim that interviewing people about certain gadgets or certain activities may highlight different kinds of trajectories and elicit certain memories (Ehn et al., 2015, p.79). The interview, they say, is a strange communicative event, and I agree. By participating in the process of interviewing through objects, I think a different order of information can be gathered. A typical interview is guided by the interviewer asking about things external to the interview, but if there is an object or an activity to center questions around, the interview becomes phenomenologically participatory. In the consumption sphere, I researched the social dynamics

and activities that actors in the specialty coffee industry were engaged in so I could mold interview questions to those practices and activities.

I conducted interviews while practicing latte art with Back Yard Brew's employees, roasting batches of coffee with Pachamama's roaster, and coffee cupping with various coffee professionals. I had to do some basic research on those activities so I could follow some sort of script to guide the interview, but I noticed that participating in activities while talking with my interlocutors yielded a more free-flowing interview where pauses and silences were comfortable—even welcomed—as the activity took precedence. I also gained certain niche information on the types of activities coffee actors were engaged in and how their knowledge and expertise on these certain activities instilled particular values and beliefs regarding coffee sourcing and buying. The point here is that engaging with objects and activities in interview contexts can illuminate particular patterns and cultural beliefs and understandings—or in this case, opinions regarding coffee preferences and ethical behaviors as demonstrated during coffee “cupping” (Ehn et al., 2015, p. 70).

My coffee cupping interview occurred at CoRo—a large communal roastery warehouse in Berkeley where small and specialty coffee shops (those that don't own their own roasters) go to roast their raw (green) beans that they source themselves from various coffee origin countries. Roasting machines are incredibly expensive—anywhere between \$10K to \$50K—so it is helpful to have a place like CoRo where coffee shops can rent windows of time to roast and package their coffee. CoRo also holds cupping events so that roasters and other coffee professionals can sample new coffees without having to travel to production origins.

Cupping is a method of evaluating characteristics of particular coffee beans using extreme quality control. It is an excellent way to increase knowledge about coffee through a series of taste and aroma observations of brewed coffee. Tasting helps drinkers identify differences between cultivars and countries of origin. I went to a cupping to observe the process involved and to research the sort of people who attended these cuppings as well as figure out where the samples of coffee were coming from. It was during one of these coffee cuppings that I experienced a moment between deciphering “truth” and “perspective.”

I treated the cupping event as a field site more than actually wanting to know the sensory mechanics of cupping. The people attending were in some way involved in coffee, whether they were roasters themselves, individual buyers of green coffee, or café owners. The sorts of

behaviors they demonstrated reflected the etiquette of coffee cupping. The questions the “cuppers” asked revealed how they valued coffee, which seemed very far removed from the small holders’ daily practices. For example, the “cuppers” would ask, “At what elevation was this coffee grown? Did this coffee come from a large lot or a micro lot? What flavor notes do you notice? What was the fermentation process—honey, natural, or dry-washed? How was the rainfall this season? Is the aftertaste bitter?” These were all technical questions involving the characteristics and qualities of the bean; however, these coffee cuppers were missing—whether intentionally, ignorantly, or obviously—a very central and important profile—that of the small holders who grew this coffee.

The coffee being sampled was from Hacienda La Minita. Hacienda La Minita called themselves a coffee-mill (in Costa Rica a coffee-mill is the same as a *beneficio*) that claimed to source many different varieties of coffee from Costa Rican micro lots that were owned by small holders. The representative from La Minita introduced herself as the trader who traveled to Costa Rica’s micro lots to source different varieties of raw coffee. We “cuppers” were given a sheet of paper that had a table with the columns labeled as follows: contract, farm, lot, variety, wet process, fermentation, drying, availability (30 kg boxes), and tasting notes. The farm column listed the type of farm the coffee was from, which stated “La Minita” or “Receiving stations from various farmers.” This is the language that CoRo consumers are being exposed to. The small holders that I had gotten to know personally in Costa Rica were simply labeled as “various farmers from receiving stations” in x region. How quickly consumers eyes scan over this fact and go straight to the variety of the coffee and the fermentation processes in which they were made. I noticed the discussion was purely about sensory observations and pricing. Perhaps these conversations make sense because it was a cupping event where the customers were there solely to try out new coffee varieties.

After the cupping event, I approached the representative who worked for La Minita to inquire about the farms from which her coffee came. I told her that I was involved with an organization that works with women small holders in Costa Rica and I wanted to familiarize myself with all these coffee cupping terms and to understand how coffee traders sourced their coffee to sample at “cuppings” such as the one we were in. I also reeled off my position as a student interested in the ethical component of coffee consumption and production, which was why I was interested in how La Minita sourced their beans. The La Minita representative nodded

and agreed stating yes, it is important that La Minita works with these small holders, which is why much of their coffee comes from these micro lots. I asked her if she had personal relations with individual small holders and she said yes.

In a remarkable coincidence, I realized while conducting fieldwork in Costa Rica, that La Minita was one of the *beneficios* in Julia Gonzalez's community. Julia was one of the "various farmers" that La Minita claimed to represent (the coffee pipeline for specialty coffee is actually quite small in Costa Rica); however, Julia presented the truth of coffee production as lived by those "various farmers." For example, Julia explained that La Minita was the name of the *beneficio* that some of the small holders in her community sell their coffee to, but any information about La Minita—aside from the receiving station where small holders drop off their coffee—was completely unknown. When I asked Julia if she knew the owners of La Minita, her response was that it was owned by an "international man." On the small holders' end, there was no mentioned nor realized relationship between La Minita's representatives and the small holders they were buying from.

While I noted the lack of direct relationships and ethical practice, I also realized that the La Minita representative secures roasters and other coffee professionals to buy her coffee by claiming that La Minita directly sources their cherries from small holder. Unfortunately, her marketing is true. La Minita is processing their coffee from individually owned small farms, but in a way that involves no direct relationships. These small holders simply drop off their cherries to La Minita's receiving station located in their community, which is enough for La Minita to claim that they source directly from micro lot small holders.

The La Minita transaction exemplifies why Sunghee Tark, CEO of Bean Voyage—an organization that provides market training to Costa Rican youth and women small holders, does not believe that there is such thing as direct trade. She claims that actors such as La Minita overlook the logistics part:

You going to origin does not necessarily mean that you are buying direct because you at the end of the day are dealing with so many intermediaries that are moving your coffee. Bean Voyage never uses direct trade in our narrative. People in Europe and the US are moving away from using the term "direct trade," and instead are moving towards the term "relationship trade." We should acknowledge the small holders and the exporters and importers who are really important partners in the supply chain. (2019)

In the La Minita encounter, I had to grapple with my ideas of truth, varying perspectives, ethics, and my own positionality on ethics. On “truth,” Renato Rosaldo claims that “plundering other people's narratives by sifting them into degrees of facticity — true, probable, possible, false — risks misunderstanding their meanings” (92). Stories cannot be proven valid or invalid by the person listening or prompting the story. I realized that the position of the interviewer or the listener is to collect and to hear the many perspectives, which in reality make up the activities that constitute the entire coffee commodity chain operations—no matter how ethical or unethical they are in my perspective. However, the “cupping” experience made me question how to go about presenting conflicting data from separate actors in such a way that does not favor one perspective above the other even though I had strong feelings of “dishonest” and “unethical” practices by La Minita involving small holders and coffee consumers within the specialty coffee culture.

Through the “cupping” experience, I wrestled with my own positionality on ethics. Because of the insights obtained from my research with the portraits of small holders, it was hard to remain neutral regarding certain practices or beliefs my interlocutors held. It was hard to maintain neutrality first in stating my opinions about what I believed and advocated for to be a priority for consumers, and second, in holding my tongue when I detected blatantly dishonest and strategic behaviors in the cupping room. After learning about the issues and struggles that small holders directly encounter while in the production sphere, I gained a certain bias or tendency to highlight their issues or believe their issues were of greater concern than those of consumers—including the specialty café business owners. After my experience with the representative from La Minita, I could not suspend my beliefs, and I firmly established my personal stance on how consumers ought to know where they are buying their coffee from because the small holders’ lives are heavily romanticized and not justly compensated. I still do maintain the belief that attention to the small holders’ realties ought to be highlighted especially in a privileged coffee drinking sphere. I also realize that it is not coffee itself that is an object of contestation or the focus of ethics, but rather it is the relations that unfold through the human interactions within it. As a roaster said when I asked what the most difficult thing was about being involved in the coffee industry, “It has nothing to do with coffee. Coffee to me is simple, it’s the people that are the frustrating and difficult ones.”

Thus, having been influenced by my field work in Costa Rica and by my experience with La Minita, I tended to feel more sympathy for the struggles and ethical encounters of small holders. However, Adam, a barista and manager at Back Yard Brew challenged my position on consumer ethics:

**Alexa: Is the price, the quality, or the story behind the bean most important for you?**

**Adam:** It is kind of tough for me to answer that question because when we are dealing with coffee sourcing, you are dealing with middlemen, especially when you are in the United States, you are not directly dealing with farmers back where the coffee is being sourced from. You are dealing with middlemen and only god knows what these middlemen are doing—whether it is spiking up prices, but I give them the benefit of the doubt. It is just finding a good enough and consistent sourcer that is extremely crucial when it comes to running a coffee shop because that is your bread and butter: the coffee beans. You can't serve coffee without the beans. No matter how small it is size wise, coffee beans are exactly what built this entire coffee shop—that one espresso machine, and that one grinder with all the coffee beans in it. So, definitely quality. That is a priority for us because we are putting our name and our brand at risk with every cup of coffee we are serving, and I cannot afford to serve a bad cup of coffee or an “okay” cup of coffee. You know what I mean? Because what the hell kind of purpose is it for someone taking time out of the day and paying me money and tipping me and being so gracious to me, for me to just serve them another cup of coffee or a “meh” product. It's not only about the cup of coffee, it is about the product, or whatever they are coming in here for.

Adam discusses the different barriers that he and café owners in the consumption sphere confront, which determines whether they stay in business. While being a small holder provides the livelihood that some individuals depend on in Costa Rica, in the same way being a successful café owner provides a livelihood for Adam. Both small holder and café owner navigate and respond to their own specific contexts' demands, struggles, and issues. These elements manifest differently depending on one's role and one's position on the coffee commodity chain and in within each sphere. A further example:

**Alexa: The “knowing” about ethical sourcing and coffee production takes more work for smaller specialty cafes regarding time, energy, and money. Is this why it [the story behind the coffee] is not a higher priority for you?**

**Adam:** Yes, there is a lot that has to be learned, especially with us not being a big corporation—we are not swimming in cash—so for example, each penny, each cent is accounted for. The cup of tea you are drinking, the stirrers customers use, the first lid that

they can't get on and they toss it in the garbage, and they grab another one, the toilet paper in the bathroom—people overlook this but those are cents and pennies coming out of our pocket, which tend to pile up and be thousands of dollars as time goes, so it's very important for us to account for everything. We don't necessarily like to cut corners. Most of the money we make we reinvest into the business.

He continues:

It is a lot of hard work, a lot of sleepless nights, a lot of sweat and blood and tears as people say, that goes into this. Because people think "oh, we are only here from 8-5," they don't realize that some of us come in at 7 to prep the place or prep the kitchen. Some of us stay here until 9-10 pm after closing to roast, to prepare the mixtures, to restock, to clean, to move all the tables and the chairs, and wipe everything because we are outdoors and deal with those elements. People are not seeing that, so they think "oh it's just an 8-5 job." It is much much more than that and countless times we would sit here after midnight trying to get something done and you can't sleep in the next day because you have to be here at 6 or 7 am. You are going to have to give up a lot of social life or a lot of hobbies—that aspect because we only have 24 hours, every one only has 24 hours. You have to take away time from this area and allocate it to this area—not even for instant gratification but more for the long term.

Adam's experiences parallels those of Costa Rican small holders. Adam, like some of the small holders, works very hard, gets little rest, but engages and finds passion through coffee. Although Adam does not own land like small holders, he does own a business and is a laborer of sorts. Adam also performs ethics in caring for his customers—knowing their needs and using coffee to ease their burdens even when he does not know exactly what these burdens are. For example:

**Adam:** People are coming to you to get caffeined up and see you—to interact with you. What I realized about a coffee purchase is that it is not an impulse decision. People wake up in the morning and think "after lunch I am going to go to Back Yard Brew and go grab my coffee." They don't just walk by a coffee place and say, "oh I forgot, I need my caffeine." People know exactly where they are going to get caffeined up because they have their favorite spot, their favorite barista, their favorite store. It [coffee drinking from a particular place] becomes a lot more of a personal interaction—it is no longer a transactional thing "just give me your money and get out."

But I am extremely critical of myself when it comes to bad interactions. Even though they are a little minimal, but they happen, and they are something that you can work on. I'm not going to say that the customer is always right because the customer can you know be going through a bad day, and if they come here and I am also having a bad day—that's not going to be the best, but if they are not taking the step to make it better then I will be the bigger person or I will overlook it just because you never know what a human being is going through. Nobody just wants to be rude, no one has the intention of wanting to just be mean to a person—you have no idea what they were dealing with

before they walked through our hallway—whether it was just getting fired, or yelled at by a manger, or a heart break, or a death of a loved one—you never know so I bear the heavy load... the benefit of the doubt. I’m pretty sure they’ll apologize later on—and if they don’t, then I did my part. That’s all I can say.

This research detects an overlap of labor ethics among the actors—the retailers, roasters, café owners—in the specialty coffee culture. However, the overlap between the ethical behaviors of small holders at coffee’s origin and the macro consumers in the specialty coffee sphere is unrecognizable by both. Each separate sphere has trouble recognizing what each other’s meanings and conceptions of ethical practices and behaviors are. Thus, relational ethics between the two seem disparate and invisible. By attempting to reconcile the ethical perspectives and behaviors at both ends of the coffee commodity chain—from the origins in Costa Rica to my local Bay Area context, what has emerged is that each small holder and each consumer approaches his/her version of ethics differently. Each one also has different projects and places of ethical engagement when addressing the struggles their coffee communities faces or the struggles they individually face. Each actor in the coffee industry—across all spheres—has a locally construed agenda, operates in different contexts, and raises different concerns.

Café owners and baristas explain that their consumers love and desire choice—options—not just a Costa Rican blend, but an Ethiopian blend. Choice keeps customers interested; thus, Back Yard Brew claims that they cannot source from just one place. However, it is also a business that struggles to stay afloat and make ends meet. Ideally, Back Yard Brew would want to have personal relationships with the small holders, but the time, energy, and price disables this model. Businesses such as Back Yard Brew must engage with big exporters and distributors who in effect provide all the coffee selections from the various countries in one place. There are international corporate distributors where Back Yard Brew picks up its coffee—and even if this is not an ideal model, it is the most economically feasible. Daniel Jaffee, researcher of the efficacy of fair trade coffee, claims that “because of the corporate dominance of the market for coffee, many ‘fair’ traders or [café owners] feel that they need to work through powerful mainstream market players in order for the system—and the benefits its generates—to grow. Yet the motivations and actions of large corporations are at odds with the philosophy of social justice” (Jaffee, 2014, p. 17). Back Yard Brew might want nothing more than to have relationships with small holder producers, but it would cost too much to take origin visits and to seek out small holders individually. Coffee drinkers struggle with pricing too—cost of living is

relevant everywhere—but still at the end of day they are the ones buying. Many times, coffee drinkers cannot afford to buy the higher priced “ethically produced and traded” coffee. However, when I asked if Back Yard Brew was interested in relationship business model with small holders its owner said, “absolutely.” Maybe there is a successful way to do this. The organization I worked with last summer defines success as follows:

Success,” which I think is producers being able to earn a thriving income—making a thriving livelihood from coffee. Roasters get into the business because they want to make a living out of it, so you don’t really do it if it is not really profitable. Why then, do we expect producers to do what they do if it is not profitable? But I would say that success in the coffee value chain is everyone making a thriving living—or having a thriving livelihood from being involved in the coffee industry whether you are an exporter, importer, roaster, micro-roaster, distributor—everyone (Tark, 2019).

### 6.3 Anonymous Inequality

Coffee’s economic role is well suited for studies of the neoliberal capitalism, which creates economic disparities between coffee consuming and coffee producing countries. I say well suited because with increased volume of coffee consumption, coffee has become an important commodity for understanding the anonymous inequality of modern consumer culture, especially within the specialty coffee market (Goodman, 2004, p. 116).

As the main focus in the specialty coffee market implies greater attention to the micro consumer and its market trends, we can say that “[small holders] [are] not isolated from wider historical processes since the products of their labor were bought and sold on the same market; however, in their daily lives and community traditions, they seemed to be isolated from that wider world involving consuming cultures” (Roseberry, 1996, p. 147).

Coffee embodies the phenomenon of anonymous global connections in a consumer culture (Goodman, 2004, p. 118). How does this anonymity triggered by the disconnectedness, unawareness, and lack of knowledge about the historical processes that shape the mechanisms of the specialty coffee industry impact both small holder and consumer? A book—*Consumer Culture: A Reference Handbook*—titles this situation “anonymous inequality” when different participants need not know each other, and usually do not, in the creation and perpetuation of the unequal distribution between the two (Goodman, 2004, p. 113). For example, coffee consumers are not intending to perpetuate a system of inequality when buying a cup of specialty coffee—

that likely is not a thought that crosses our minds. In fact, if coffee consumers are truly unaware and mystified by the processes and the numerous participants involved in the creation of their drink, they may view large companies such as Starbucks and other specialty coffee industries who engage in profiting off the livelihoods of small holders in unequal ways as solely places where they can get consistently good coffee and their level of price comfort. They are not thinking about engaging with mechanisms that are at play in unequal market distributions, but nonetheless, their unawareness still accounts for some role, no matter how minimal, in widening the economic gap. Even though the consumer means only to buy a cup of coffee, the system takes this action as an input and uses it to distribute resources. In many cases this distribution is unequal (Goodman, 2004). There are coffee consumers who consciously stigmatize inequality and coffee consumers who unconsciously and anonymously do so. In other words, stigmatized inequality occurs when relations between actors are known, or at least recognized, while anonymous inequality occurs when relations between actors are unknown to each other, or at least very difficult to recognize. Typically, those participating in stigmatized inequality are causing or enforcing inequality through intentional economic and political actions, while those participating in anonymous inequality find it difficult to see direct political effects on the small holders. In order to lessen the impact of the continuing inequalities present in the specialty coffee market, coffee consumers have the ability to actively attend to the historical processes that shape their consumer positions and consider to what extent their consumer behaviors influence the specialty coffee industry.

## Conclusion

Social life is a continuous activity that simultaneously reproduces and transforms the world (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2019, p. 38). The small holders and consumers engage in similar practices and behaviors that sustain and transform the coffee commodity industry. These practices and behaviors do not reside in abstract schemes or categories. They also do not exist independently from one another. Coffee's history involves micro and macro practices that flow between different spheres. These exchanges do indeed represent capitalist interactions; however, this research has demonstrated that the capitalist market is not driven just by surplus-value, commodities, and profit-maximization, but rather the market is driven by a broader range of sentiments and desires that inform those uses (Yanagisako, 2002, p. 17). Labor and the capitalist

market that was produced by it have expanded beyond the constraints of the traditional market. As sociologist Mark Granovetter notes, “actors” attempts at purposive actions in economic life are actually embedded in concrete, ongoing systems and social relations” rather than dictated by the anonymous market of neo-classical models (Granovetter, 1985, pp. 482- 495). Thus, the question is “how can we develop analytical understandings that attend both to the real large-scale changes that the grand old narratives accounted for (or pretended to) and to the persistently divergent pathways of labor and livelihoods that empirical research documents for different sites and regions within a comprehensively interconnected but highly differentiated global political economy” (Ferguson & Li, 2018, p. 3)?

This paper has attempted to situate local systems in the wider political and social worlds of which they are apart, and understand how they operate together (Ortner, 1984, p. 142). This paper also comments on the nature of capitalism—how capitalism has made these seemingly disparate practices and actions of small holders and coffee actors standardized, distanced, and abstract, and why such a phenomenon occurs (Appel, 2019, p. 4). The ethnographic approach in assessing these subcultures within the capitalist market and even within the coffee industry contributes to an understanding of small holder and consumer beliefs and engagements in their “ethics of labor.” This research attempts to reconcile the ethical perspectives and behaviors at both ends of the coffee commodity chain— from the origins in Costa Rica to the Bay Area specialty coffee consumer context. I have learned that each actor in the production and consumption sphere approaches their version of ethics differently. Each one also has different projects and places of ethical engagement when addressing the struggles their coffee communities face or the struggles they individually face.

Such a specific analysis can fruitfully be conducted using a range of methods, at a variety of sites. As Ferguson and Li claim, “A focus on the empirical contours of the present—what is there, and what is emergent—does not recreate isolated other-worlds, nor evacuate history, space, or relationality but rather takes them seriously as formative elements of the conjunctures we study. Grids of difference and similarity organized around a common set of questions are, at one level, descriptive devices. But if the questions we have posed are the right ones, they could contribute to a renewed global political economic analysis of lives and livelihoods—one more adequate to our times”—and perhaps, one more equitable (Ferguson & Li, p. 2018).

Thus, this paper contributes to the conversation about capitalism. Specifically, this research positions consumer capitalists to think about capitalism through its cultural forms—the culture of specialty coffee in relation to the small holders supplying its coffee. As Appel states, “capitalism is made through and with the things anthropology has been so good at capturing—specific people and histories, places and politics, landscapes and livelihoods” (2019, p. 5). Thus, this research lends itself to an understanding of coffee culture by analyzing the evolution of capitalism through the lens of the coffee commodity chain in the consumption sphere and production sphere. In other words, this paper engages with capitalist markets through the coffee industry as historical, economic, and ethical phenomenon to navigate each coffee actors’ positions and ethical practices.

If the readers of this paper are coffee actors and individual drinkers, then the question is “what now?” Sunghee Tark, CEO of Bean Voyage, suggests:

The question is how do you [micro roasters and retailers] communicate to your customers? If your cost is different, make it clear to customers that your story/narrative behind your coffee is the reason that they are paying more for it. If you go to a wine bar, you are not going to pay a high price without being given the reason for why the bottle is so expensive. We as consumers, if there is any right reason for us to spend that money on that product then we will (personal interview, 2019).

The individual drinker at the end of the coffee commodity chain is paying for the final price of a coffee and driving roasters, retailers, and cafés to make the marketing, buying, advertising and choices. Individual drinkers are the ones who can push their roasters and cafés to buy better. As Tark continues:

Whoever has the last money in their hands are very powerful, even though power is not being distributed equally across the coffee supply chain. Everyone wants to get a larger cut of the pie rather than being equally distributing. Because of the asymmetry in information and resources, small holders are at the shorter end of the stick and they actually cannot even cut a bigger piece of that pie. The coffee industry is market driven—driven ultimately by the individual. To change the coffee industry requires a huge structural shift in the way that we trade and drink coffee. Bigger players must change, but there is no answer in how to change them. There needs to be empathy. (2019)

Tark addresses how “value” is generated at every stage until the final consumer is drinking the coffee. She claims that there is no easy answer to solve the structural issues involved in the coffee industry that disproportionately impact small holders. Daniel Jaffee ultimately claims that

action by states and global institutions will be able to counteract the harmful effects of global free trade and reign in corporate power (Jaffee, 2014, p. 263). Conversely, Tark discusses an empathetic approach and investigates how small holders can thrive within their individual spheres. She equates “thriving” to “sustaining,” and claims that “sustainability” insinuates that one is trying to sustain themselves in a broken structure. However, “sustainable” should rather signify that one should be able to earn enough income to live out one’s livelihood even if environmental sustainability is not there. Sustainability means one is able to pursue the things that make one’s life more full and complete. Like small holders’ value on coffee and labor, there are many valid ways to conceive of value, and sustainability entails the ability to pursue those things. Sustainability also applies to the lives of not only the small holders, but also to the rest of the coffee supply chain from the individual drinkers to the distributors and to the roasters—the coffee industry is an all-encompassing and interdependent system of relations. Small holders cannot chase after buyers, roasters cannot coordinate import logistics—at least not in a timely manner—everyone in the coffee industry has their own niche role that makes the industry possible. Thus, the goal is to mold this system as free from discrimination and disadvantage as possible; yet this is no easy task. Creating equity between small holders and consumers as an economic phenomenon or at least defining how equity might be reached is challenging since small holders and consumers cannot really imagine a joint equity. Small holders cannot envision, nor spend the time trying to envision, the latte culture and thus cannot see the dynamics occupying the consumption sphere—they are blind to this, thus most of their ethical ideas deal with local phenomena. I would argue that consumers may have more of an idea of what occurs in the production sphere than what small holders know in the consumption sphere because they can be autonomous market actors and conduct their own research.

We must begin by weaving through the coffee consumption sphere and the coffee production sphere to glimpse into the terrains of ethically conceived and oriented behaviors that unfold and overlap within, but rarely between the two spheres. The everyday practices that are disparate to consumers and small holders do conjoin with each other since, ultimately, coffee does fill up billions of consumer mugs globally and daily. Accordingly, this paper prompts us to consider how consumption as a mediating form of activism, might help us understand ourselves, and the factors affecting small holders, as we both continue to engage the coffee industry. As Doña Arsenia reminds us, “we cannot see what we do not know.” Therefore, to constructively

address this situation, the consumer must know—as best we can—the variations of labor and ethics that each individual exercises within and between these spheres. Consumers cannot act, nor even undertake transformations of the coffee industry without understanding the broad range of economic and social interactions and relations at play in the coffee capitalist system. The exploration of coffee capitalism is thus a constant and ongoing project that anyone can contribute to. Start with your morning cup of coffee.

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