

Victoria Parker

12 December 2012

Dr. Cook

Writing 100 Honors

The Importance of Coffee: The Fair Trade Movement and the RI Café Culture

Coffee-Crazed and Self-Conscious

Here I am, an 18-year old college freshman with a coffee addiction, who has resided all her life in a state whose state beverage is coffee milk, pondering what subject to choose for her Writing 100 Honors fieldworking project. It is only natural, then, that my thoughts and taste buds turn to coffee. Specifically, towards choosing a café as my fieldsite. Just like coffee holds a special place in my heart, so too does the small, fairly-new café near my home called Providence Coffee Roasters.

Although I have only been there occasionally, I enjoyed each time I went. It is so different from the Dunkin Donuts I've been accustomed to all my life. As far as I know, my town has never had a café in the area before. We have two Dunkin Donuts in either direction five minutes from my house, multiple dry cleaners, cheap hair salons, and pizza joints, but nothing like PCR: a café that offers fresh crepes instead of frozen bagels and where the price of a small coffee is equivalent to that of a Dunkin Donuts' medium or large. I am attracted to this place where Ethiopian coffee beans are ground on site; where local art is hung from the walls and local musicians play. I want to immerse myself into this relaxed atmosphere. This is a haven for coffee lovers. I know enough about Providence Coffee Roasters to figure out the different aspects I can study: the importance of the fair trade, organic coffee they use, their interaction with our community through charities, and their function as a space for art, music and socializing.

Yet, despite being familiar with my fieldsite, I have my reservations. For one, I have inherited from my family an uneasiness and awkwardness around people and places that are clearly of a different status. I can't help aligning PCR with Starbucks, a place that my dad says "is for snobs," compared to Dunkin Donuts, which is "coffee for the average Joe." PCR seems to fall into that "yuppie" category. Of my family, my aunt is the only one who goes to Starbucks somewhat regularly. Although I have gone a few times with her, I still don't know how to order anything without sounding out of place, and the same applies to PCR. Although PCR doesn't have an ordering process as extravagant as Starbucks', they still use coffee terms like "macchiato" and "Americano" that are foreign to me. Thus, when I visited PCR before, as welcoming and peaceful as the place's atmosphere was, I stumbled when I ordered, unsure of how one gets their coffee there. Each time I go back, the uneasiness persists. This, I fear, will continue in my research.

I enjoy cafés like PCR for their artistic, relaxed space, their environmentally-conscious attitude, and their delicious coffee. However, I have to acknowledge that maybe I want to immerse myself in this culture because I hope to *become* one of those "hipster" café-goers who walks in and orders a macchiato in the morning, and not the person I am, ordering a Mocha XX in a drive-thru instead. My class status affects how I perceive this place and how I feel I am perceived by those who go there. Just like I judge Starbucks-goers as "wealthy" people I am aware that I might jump to the same assumptions about PCR during my observations.

However, I decide to overcome these anxieties and proceed with my research. After all, the entire point of fieldworking is to be an awkward outsider; the goal is to gain the perspectives of the insiders by the end. Thus, I commit myself to answering one broad question: what roles do cafés play in our society? Little do I realize that I will learn much more than I initially intend.

Observations and Crepes

My first experience as a fieldworker occurs on Monday, October 8th in the afternoon. I'm a strange mixture of nerves and excitement as I pull up to the tiny shop. The shop can be found tucked in between a Gourmet Chinese cuisine restaurant and a dumpy laundromat that's managed to survive in the Riverside plaza for years. Two tiny red metal tables sit outside the shop storefront window, above which hangs a sign that reads "Providence Coffee Roasters" and another that says "La Creperie: Paris Meets Providence." Pizza joints, liquor stores, a scum-filled pond and a gas station surround the plaza nearby, and yet here, the sign claims, one can be transported to a place of sophisticated European origin.

The bell dings as I open the door, and at the sound, the staff worker standing behind the counter looks up and says hello. I make my way over to the counter, quickly striding across the bare, exposed- brown concrete floor to the neatly-arranged assembly of tea, espresso machines, and tiny stove tops. I've come here with two purposes: one, to take my first set of fieldnotes, and two, to get something to eat. It's around lunch time so I figure a crepe would be the perfect option. I order a Banana and Nutella one, which arrives at my chosen seat in the main room carried by the friendly but monotone-voiced staff worker. I eagerly cut into this steaming hot, near-transparent thin pancake to reveal an ooze of hazelnut chocolate spread mixed with sliced bananas. As I slowly savor my lunch, I look around the room from my vantage point by the wall. I'm seated at one of only four round tables crowded together by a wall showcase of paintings and photographs. The walls of the room are divided into sections by color: the small room adjacent to this one is a bright orange and the main room a split of three colored sections, one being a tree silhouette painted in black chalkboard paint over a white wall by the counter, another two walls painted bright teal, and one grey wall. My table by the grey wall, a table fit for two people, has a

recycled coffee bean sack, like the ones Providence Coffee Roasters has displayed in the glass-walled roasting room across from me, pressed up against the glass table top. The burlap material, in faded print, reads “FAIR TRADE” and “CERTIFIED ORGANIC.” I think this is a nice touch, a stylish way to emphasize the café’s globally-friendly and environmentally-conscious business approach. Yet, I also wonder why there are only four tables here. Surely they could have fit more tables in the empty space between the door and the counter, but whether that space is used for something else, like live entertainment, or whether more tables are simply unnecessary, I don’t know.

In the first few minutes I’ve sat here, only a young Asian man has been seated alone at the table in front of me. Dressed in tan corduroy skinny jeans, brown loafers, a beige turtleneck and black framed glasses, I can’t help observing that not only is he a monochromatic palette of earthy tones, but he also fits the “hipster” stereotype, the kind of person I expect to find at a café. Clearly a college student, accessorized with a laptop and iPhone, he is consumed in his work, quickly navigating web pages and articles as he jots down notes on paper. His set up suggests he has already been here a while and intends to stay even longer. I glance over from my observation of the student to the older couple who has just walked in, their arrival announced by the dingy bell. The man who sits at the table by the window, right next to the young man’s, is clearly not a “hipster.” This older man, around his 50s or 60s, sports a blue baseball cap with yellow lettering, well-worn jeans, yellow work boots and a white-haired, American-style Fu Manchu mustache. Something about him (maybe it’s just the mustache) makes him resemble a biker. As he flips through a newspaper he grabbed from the stack on the window ledge, the woman who I assume to be his wife comes over with two hot coffees, their robust, freshly-brewed scent lingering in the air behind her. Prior to their arrival, those in the café were quiet,

the silence of the room broken only by a mix of peaceful pop music and indie alternative playing from the speakers. Now, the space is punctuated by the man's gravelly, booming voice as the couple discusses their day at work. It becomes obvious that the man has never been here before, suggested by his careful observing of the roasting room and the jewelry display set up for a charity's cause. "You like it then? And you thought you weren't going to," I hear his wife tease him, and the man's gruff reply: "No, I do. I'd like to try some of their other stuff some time. Two people, \$13 ain't bad no matter where you go." Unlike this couple who stays until they have drained the last drop of coffee from their recycled brown paper cups, other new customers that come in simply order what they want and leave.

A large, boisterous high-school group comes in, talking over each other while ordering coffees at the counter. Like the young couple who comes in after them, though, they too don't bother to sit down. I wonder why not many people stay. The room is certainly inviting: fragrant with the smell of coffee and softly lit by hanging lamps and the afternoon sun, its cozy warm temperature insulates those inside from the brisk autumn air outdoors. And yet business is slow, sometimes a good 20 minutes ticking by before another customer comes in. This waiting time gives the staff worker an opportunity to tidy the shelves, rearrange the bags of coffee for sale on their wobbly stand in the corner, and scoop more coffee beans from their bulging sacks into the shiny, stainless steel monster of a grinder. The French-style, light maple wood door leading into the grinding room is wide open, but throughout my hour of fieldnote-taking I don't hear the grinder once used, much to my disappointment. However, I still leave PCR feeling satisfied with my work, albeit without any kind of conclusion. There weren't enough customers there in order for me to determine how busy the café normally is, or whether that was the usual amount of business. I need to observe some more.

A Hipster Hangout

Circumstances prevent me from returning to Providence Coffee Roasters for a second observation. During the process of roof repairs the café was damaged internally, and they have since been under renovation. Since I can't continue to wait for their reopening, I head over to the Coffee Exchange on Wickenden Street in Providence on Sunday, November 4th. I have to summon all of my courage to enter. I'm well out of my comfort zone going to a place I've never been before, and so fears and insecurities fill me with hesitation.

I have trouble finding the building, and am surprised to discover that the café is located in what appears to be an old yellow house. I receive a shock of color as I enter the room through a mural-painted vestibule, only to then find myself surrounded by tightly-tucked round tables seating clusters of people working alone on their laptops or socializing in groups. A colorful array of pamphlets, flyers, posters and advertisements for local businesses and events decorate the walls bulletin-board style, adding to the creatively-mismatched, artsy vibe. The strong smell of coffee permeates the compact space, clinging to my hair and clothing like perfume.

It is only two o'clock in the afternoon when I arrive but the place is bustling. I can't believe how busy it is, especially compared to the trickle of customers that I had observed at PCR. Not only are all the tables full here, but there is never a lingering moment at the counter—unlike the slow pace of PCR, customers are always present here. In fact, customers have to wait at the counter to order, packed in like a concert mosh pit. The majority of the customers appear to be college students in their 20s, likely from nearby colleges RISD and Brown. Most have the stereotypical hipster look, too: black-framed glasses, skinny jeans, loafers, and beanies, all ordering their lattes and selecting their coffee from a candy shop-style display of whole coffee

beans in a variety of flavors. Although I am a college student myself, the space feels almost threatening to me, the outsider. I feel like they can tell I'm not one of them; that I'm a fraud.

The number of people sitting so close to my small two-person table near the bulletin board wall increases my sense of claustrophobia. Jazz music can vaguely be heard in the background, and I'm struck again by how similar and different this place is to PCR. The beehive of activity is in stark contrast with the slow, low-key atmosphere of PCR, and yet they both function for the same reasons. Both aim to provide their customers with a place to work or socialize over a cup of quality coffee, in an environment that is small, comfortable, and artistic. Both provide a place to think.

Rhode Island Runs on Coffee

The concept of cafés as both a social and work space, a place for the community to interact and brainstorm, isn't new. Since the 18th century, coffeehouses and cafés have served as places for people to gather, socialize and even hatch revolutions—and played prominent roles in other ancient societies long before then. In 18th century London, for example, the more than two thousand coffeehouses occupying the city were known as “penny universities, because for that price one could purchase a cup of coffee and sit for hours listening to extraordinary conversations”(Pendergrast 12). Historian Antony Wild agrees, asserting that “coffee had become the fuel of the [English seventeenth century] Enlightenment; in North America, where it arrived some twenty years later, it became indelibly associated with the struggle for independence” (132). The influence of coffee for both nations comes as no surprise, considering that the North American colonists had been loyal British subjects prior to the Revolution and therefore “emulated the coffee boom of the mother country” (Pendergrast 14). In fact, the first American coffeehouse opened in Boston in 1689 (Pendergrast 15). Ironically, coffeehouses were

the headquarters of the American Revolution, the outcome of which indirectly determined America's preference for coffee over tea. Wild explains that, although the Boston Tea Party "was neither a reaction to tea nor the expression of a preference for coffee, [it] nonetheless transformed the drinking habits of the fledgling nation" (137). Thus, America's love for coffee was born.

At the closing of the nineteenth century, the United States consumed almost half of the world's coffee, according to investigative journalist Mark Pendergrast (44). Apparently, America's love for coffee had morphed into an obsession. Today, the U.S. is the world's number one coffee consumer, consuming 1,121,000 tons of coffee (Wild 231). Even as the smallest state in America, Rhode Island manages to embody this cultural coffee fanaticism. One indicator is the number of doughnut shops in the Rhode Island region. As of 2004, Providence, Rhode Island was found to have "more doughnut shops per capita than anywhere else," according to Mark Patinkin. With one doughnut shop for every 4,700 people, Providence outranks even Boston, which has one shop per every 5,750 people (Patinkin). As one of the primary doughnut shops in Rhode Island and the Northeast region, Dunkin Donuts has 225 shops in Rhode Island, "making it the densest collection of any territory" (Patinkin). Considering that coffee makes up more than two-thirds of its sales (Patinkin), Dunkin Donuts seems to demonstrate Rhode Island's love for coffee, especially cheap coffee, more than anything. The culture of Rhode Island and America has been shaped by its coffee consumerism.

Love and Integrity in a Cup

With my new knowledge of coffee consumerism, and my observations of coffee consumers in PCR, I was curious for another perspective. Do café employees love PCR as much as their customers do? For that matter, do they also hold the same opinions about PCR's coffee

or about other places' coffee, like Starbucks'? With these questions in mind, I arrange an interview with an employee at PCR.

It is dark, raining, and cold when I arrive at Dunkin Donuts 20 minutes early for my interview. Interviewing a stranger, coupled with the overall dreariness of the day, has filled me with foreboding. What if he hates me? What if he doesn't want to answer my questions? I twitch around in an uncomfortable chair at a large, round table across from the TV in anticipation. Luckily, my interviewee arrives on time at five o'clock, greets me with a wave, orders his coffee, and sits down.

I observe that my interviewee (who opts for the pseudonym "The Jimbo" out of personal amusement) wears a gray sweatshirt, a hat over his medium-length shaggy brown hair, and a shy smile that compliments his bright blue eyes. Scratchy facial hair and a sturdy build attest to his age of 22 years, as does his mellow vibe. His attitude calms my nerves, as does his open friendliness and humor. I don't doubt him when he tells me how much he loves people. It shows in his manners and disposition, in the way he gives me his full attention and even seeks to buoy the interview when I struggle to think of questions to ask.

Once the interview gets rolling, his relaxed position and lighthearted sarcasm give way to more animated movements and enthusiasm, as he demonstrates his points by drawing graphs and poking holes in the lids of our coffee cups. He is sheepish in admitting that he quit PCR in favor of "a better job" at Starbucks, which I assume to mean a better-paying job (especially with PCR still closed), although I can't be sure. However, it remains clear his passion for his former job at the café, and moreover, his passion for coffee and for people. "I'm kind of a coffee snob," he laughs. "I have a problem... this is my fourth [coffee] today." Not only does he enjoy coffee, but he's a human Wikipedia of coffee facts. Through his experience as barista (or "baristo," as he

calls it), he is able to explain to me, in detail, the differences between specialty drinks like cappuccinos and lattes (the ratio of espresso to milk/foam), but then emphasizes how “they’re all the same.”

As a true coffee aficionado as well as a coffee server, for my interviewee, it all comes down to quality. As he explains, the goal is to get the customer “a quality drink as quick as possible.” For him, quality and equality go hand in hand. “Fair trade is making sure that people are getting taken care of, you know what I mean? There’s quality to it; there’s integrity behind your product.” He further elaborates that “when you don’t know where your coffee’s coming from, you don’t know if people are being treated correctly, you don’t know... you don’t know anything.” I can detect genuine concern in his voice when he speaks about the injustice done to farmers and workers in the coffee industry, as well as his passion for fair trade. When I question him about customers’ responses to fair trade, whether it makes a difference or not, he sounds slightly irritated when he comments: “It depends who the customer is. It’s not going to matter to everyone. It just doesn’t. Some people don’t care about other people, they care about price... But for people who care and want quality coffee, yeah, that matters.”

I am surprised to find out halfway through the interview that “The Jimbo” is a business major in college, in addition to doing music on the side. His band even performs at PCR occasionally, for free, which helps promote his music. The musician, “baristo,” and businessman mix of his interests gives the interview an interesting quality, as he alternates from explaining how coffee beans are picked to the marketing and financial business strategies of PCR. As he points out, customer service is at the core of surviving as a business:

“One of the reasons why I love working there is because we’re allowed to be really outgoing towards people, to the point where it hurts us. So it’s like, if someone’s unhappy

with something, you're allowed to give them a free drink...I didn't learn this through PCR but through school: it is ten times as hard to get a new customer than to keep a customer. So if I was going to lose [a customer] over a dollar cup of coffee, that's... a BIG mistake. As a business, when it comes down to numbers, it's worth it. When it comes down to loving people, it's worth it."

As a frequent coffee-consumer, he feels "appreciated as a customer by the way employees interact with [him]." He points out that, "When I go into Starbucks and they're really outgoing and care, that's cool, versus here [at Dunkin where] I'm a small regular half-decaf." My interviewee's firm belief in businesses caring for people and treating them as individual human beings strikes me. It seems so much at contrast with my perception of how businesses normally function. Even his values as an employee are unique. For example, the reason why he decided to work at Starbucks is because "they [as well as PCR] pride themselves just on making people feel more comfortable; loving people."

I leave the interview feeling extremely grateful for his thoughtful responses to my questions, as well as leaving with new information concerning the production of coffee and business motivations and marketing. Moreover, after I leave I can't help hoping that "The Jimbo" will take PCR's lesson of "love and integrity" with him into this business world, where I'm sure they could use the change in perspective.

A Bad Cup o' Joe

Unfortunately, "love and integrity" hasn't been the motto for the coffee industry. Nor, for that matter, has it defined Rhode Island's involvement with coffee and trade. As a prominent American participator in the Triangle Trade of the 18th century, Rhode Island contributed an estimated 106,000 slaves from Africa (6), according to Jay Coughtry's book *The Notorious*

Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade. In return for slaves and chief exports like rum and lumber, Rhode Island gained in return “the staples and manufactured goods they lacked, such as sugar” (Coughtry 31) from the West Indies, which were not only consumed in the state but also throughout the colonies (Coughtry 12). Considering that the “history of sugar is intimately tied to that of coffee” (Pendergrast 17), especially in America, due to the demand of milk and sugar to make boiled coffee more palatable (Pendergrast 47), and that coffee was principally exported from the West Indies to America during that time period (Wild 228), it can be surmised that Rhode Island’s participation in the slave trade was also, indirectly, a participation in the coffee trade. While this could be an explanation for Rhode Island’s coffee fanaticism, it also casts a dark shadow over its history of loving coffee.

The mistreatment of human beings plays a sad role in the history of coffee, on both national and global levels. As Wild points out, “as [coffee] consumption expanded both in America and Europe” the West Indies ceded to “the newly independent countries of Central and South America [that] took up coffee production” (228). The consequences turned out to be those of a more discreet, albeit no less horrible, form of slavery and subservience. An estimated 125 million people today are “dependant on coffee growing for their livelihood” (Wild 1). While coffee consumers benefit from low coffee prices, the producers, farmers and laborers of coffee find themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum.

Fair Trade coffee aims to rectify the injustices of the coffee industry. Essentially, the Fair Trade Movement attempts to bridge the gap between our coffee consumerism and other nations’ poverty. Deborah Sick’s pilot study “Coffee, Farming Families, and Fair Trade In Costa Rica: New Markets, Same Old Problems?” analyzes the effect coffee consumption has on Third World countries, specifically Costa Rica, and how Fair Trade helps or doesn’t help the farmers there. As

Sick notes, the “FT movement has been instrumental in challenging the structure of conventional global commodity markets and in attempting to compensate small farmers for the social and environmental value embodied in their crops.” Unfortunately, the positive effects of the Fair Trade Movement have yet to be seen, primarily due to “insufficient [consumer] demand for Fair Trade, [which] remains a significant problem” as well as “prohibitively high” cost certification for farmers, thereby preventing them from becoming Fair Trade producers or reducing their profits to the extent that “FT guaranteed minimum prices were not much better than conventional market prices.”

It remains to be seen whether the Fair Trade movement will be able to help these struggling farmers, especially since “it has yet to achieve the critical mass necessary for it to support a coffee supply chain that can survive independently of the world market” (Wild 265). Considering that the USA is the number one coffee consumer in the world, its meager consumption of 2,000 tons of Fair Trade coffee a year (only making it the fourth largest consumer of Fair Trade) suggests that America’s interests lay elsewhere (Wild 231). Perhaps American consumers simply need a little prompting from small businesses, like my fieldsite Providence Coffee Roasters, to raise their awareness and take action.

Conclusion: The Choice Facing Consumers

Prior to this fieldworking project, I knew little about the history of coffee and cafés in American and Rhode Island culture, let alone the negative implications it has had on Third World countries. I had never heard of Fair Trade coffee before, nor knew its advantages and disadvantages. As a coffee consumer, I would buy a pound of coffee without considering the possible consequences, and drink my daily Dunkin Donuts Mocha XX without wondering where it came from or who it could be hurting. That isn’t to say I’ve boycotted Dunkin Donuts or only

buy Fair Trade coffee since then—as a coffee addict, some habits are be hard to break. Besides, I'm a financially-strapped college student who must frugally spend each dollar. However, I do find myself much more self-aware about my coffee purchases, unconsciously noting which brands are Fair Trade and which ones aren't as I stare at a shelf of one pound coffee bags in the supermarket. I can only hope that I've heightened my reader's sensitivity as well. After all, it's us, the consumers, who have the power to choose which coffee, which company, whose policies we support through our purchases. In the midst of our busy lives, we often forget the people on the other side.

I'm grateful to Providence Coffee Roasters for opening my eyes to the coffee industry on local, national and global levels. If it wasn't for their activism as a business, I wouldn't have gained the experiences and knowledge that I have. I fully intend to be a regular customer (whether that makes me a hipster or not) at the wonderful little café when they reopen, which should be very soon. I hope that, after more than a month of being closed, customers will return and the business will continue to thrive. Just like we, the consumers, have the power to choose our coffee brand, we also have the power to choose who serves us our quick fix of caffeine. Will we choose the café for its personable atmosphere, for the support of local entrepreneurship, for its dedication to people both near and afar, or will we choose the national franchise for its familiarity, its efficiency, its convenience, and its wallet-friendly prices? Cafés and coffeehouses have long held importance in our society historically, but the persistence of their role in our culture as social, work, art and music spaces depends entirely on the choices we coffee consumers make today.

Works Cited

- Coughtry, Jay. *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981. Print.
- Jimbo, The. Personal Interview. 13 November 2012.
- Patinkin, Mark. "Chewing over why we love doughnut shops- Do we really crave the cake- or the caffeine?" *The Providence Journal*. 10 August 2004, G-01. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 October 2012.
- Pendergrast, Mark. *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How it Transformed our World*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Print.
- Sick, Deborah. "Coffee, Farming Families, and Fair Trade in Costa Rica: New Markets, Same Old Problems?" *Latin American Research Review*. 43.3. (2008): 193-208. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 28 October 2012.
- Wild, Antony. *Coffee: A Dark History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005. Print.