

Fair Trade Coffee Exchanges and Community Economies

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Despite the shortened commodity chain created for coffee through fair trade, there still exist a number of actors within certified commodity exchange. This chain is populated by disproportionately engaged actors, from a consumer looking for the certification seal, to coffee roasters working directly with coffee producing cooperatives, to producers striving to keep up with the standards for certification. Despite such disparities, connections are made between the roasters and the growers of coffee at multiple sites, from community-based projects to the transfer of knowledge and storytelling beyond the communities where coffee is cultivated. These connections suggest that fair trade exchanges potentially go beyond the sale of a commodity, the creation of surplus value and the connecting of producer and consumer. In this paper I draw on the expanding literature on diverse and community economies to examine fair trade exchanges. The heterogeneous space of the community economy provides a platform for considering the diversity of exchanges happening within, outside and alongside capitalism. In this paper I focus on fair trade certified coffee, moving beyond current explanations of fair trade as ‘alternative’ and working toward a multiplying of our understanding(s) of what fair trade is. Utilizing data collected in Chiapas, Mexico with two coffee producing cooperatives and their U.S.-based partner roasters, as well as analysis of the 2016 celebration of Fair Trade Month, I reframe fair trade to examine the power and privilege in certified exchanges and consider the broader fair trade network as a site of community economies.

Keywords: diverse economies, community economies, fair trade, coffee, Chiapas

Alternatives, whatever that disputed term might be taken to mean, are no longer simply jottings in the margins of a central text about global neoliberalization; they are to be considered in their own right, with their own specific and contingent problems and successes, achievements and shortcomings, disappointments and hopeful surprises (Gibson-Graham 2006a:vii-viii)

In 2012, I was told by a producer: “our coffee sells and it sends a message that we are still here.” This statement from a member of a rebel autonomous coffee cooperative in Chiapas, Mexico signals that perhaps the exchange of coffee in the fair trade marketplace is about more than connecting a disparate producer and consumer. Fair trade exchanges are often heralded as an alternative to the unequal exchanges of free trade, however, this framing begs the question: alternative for whom? These networks are populated by disparate actors who perform and practice these exchanges in very different contexts. For producers in Chiapas, Mexico, the sale of

coffee in the fair trade marketplace is a mechanism in their broader struggle for dignified livelihoods, despite the disparities within the global economic exchange of coffee. Framing fair trade as alternative does not tell us very much about these practices. In this paper, I suggest a new approach to considering fair trade exchanges, by examining economic difference.

Drawing on a diverse and community economies framing assists with this project and opens up the possibilities for understanding a diversity of economic practices and illuminating the ways in which people work to build dignified worlds (Roelvink et al. 2015). While a diverse and community economies framing contributes to opening up our discussions of fair trade exchanges, I argue that a re-reading of fair trade as a site of community economies exposes the messiness and potential unevenness within economic difference. My goals in this paper are two-fold: first, to move toward retheorizing fair trade exchanges, going beyond considerations of fair trade as an alternative within and against the capitalist market; and second, to push on diverse and community economies theories to expand beyond localized sites of economic difference and to reframe economies with a reflexive gaze that is attentive to the power (domination and resistance) and privilege, which may (or may not) be present, a task that cannot be accomplished by this paper alone, but may provide a platform for extended analysis and discussion.

As third-party certified food and agricultural products are becoming more commonplace in the U.S., serious questions are being raised about how they function as so-called “alternatives” to conventional systems (cf. Bacon 2010; Dolan 2010; Guthman 2007; Jaffe and Howard 2016; Lyon 2011; Lyon et al. 2016; Mutersbaugh 2002; 2004; 2005a; 2016; Naylor 2014; 2017a; Renard and Loconto 2013; Wilson 2010). Third-party certified products represent an attempt to create networks for more direct trade of food and agricultural products that function as different forms of commodity exchange in the food system and which guarantee a set of production

practices. Such exchanges are intended to give more autonomy to producers in the marketplace, facilitate greater connections between producers and consumers, and ameliorate risks associated with participating in commodity markets. The introduction of these exchanges draws attention to the imbalances in systems of food and agricultural production and trade. As such, the question of how (or if) alternatives work against conventional food systems is a provocative one. If we are to consider such economic exchanges, not just as sites at the “margins” as Gibson-Graham (2006a) in the quote that leads this paper suggests we should, what space(s) does fair trade occupy and what ‘successes and disappointments’ exist in and between these spaces?

In evaluating fair trade certified economic exchanges there are three major trends in the literature. First, they are evaluated as alternative to commodity capitalism, providing socially embedded markets that insulate producer participants from the vagaries of commodity production and provide community, household, and individual empowerment; second, they are assessed in political economic contexts, which consider if “producer subjects” (Naylor 2014:274) receive sufficient monetary benefits as part of participation; and third, they are critically examined as a site of moral and/or solidarity economies and ethical consumerism. Here, I propose an additional avenue, which is attentive to economic difference in commodity exchanges. Previous approaches to analyzing ‘alternative’ trade mechanisms, while important for considering how they function as so-called alternatives to mainstream markets, have reached an impasse in considerations of commodity exchange that is in and against the capitalist market (ibid).

In this paper, my approach is to examine fair trade exchanges through the lens of diverse economies (cf. Gibson Graham 2006a&b; Roelvink et al. 2015) with specific attention to community economies, which represent sites of economic difference, rather than spaces in and

against capitalism. The heterogeneous space of the community economy provides a window on the diversity of exchanges happening within, outside, and alongside capitalism. Fair trade coffee exchanges link disparate spaces, facilitating distant connections through nodes in the food system. Yet, how are we to understand these exchanges as they relate to communities of dissimilar economic actors and varied economic performances across transnational spaces? I argue that these exchanges tend to produce asymmetrical relationships and that the “community” in community economies produces power and privilege in uneven ways.¹

To provide a foundation for understanding the character of exchanges through fair trade certified coffee networks I begin with a broad overview of fair trade literature and critiques. This review is followed by a brief discussion of the retheorizing done in diverse and community economies literature. To elucidate how the “community” component of community economies is performed, I then discuss the uneven relations within fair trade coffee exchanges and the ‘imagined communities’ and asymmetries present. I also demonstrate how attempts to connect consumers and producers through more direct exchanges are undercut by significant differences in how community is performed by offering a highlight from empirical work from Chiapas, Mexico, and an analysis of social media campaigns in the United States during the 2016 celebration of Fair Trade Month. I conclude with remarks regarding future considerations of community economies as sites of economic difference.

Fair Trade

The introduction of fair trade certified products in the marketplace created a space for asking questions about equity in trade and labor relations. This “fairer” exchange is lauded by third-party certifiers as a way to ‘lift people out of poverty’ and connect disparate producers and

consumers through a simplified commodity chain (cf. Nicholls and Opal 2005). Through a set of rules and standards fair trade certification attempts to create a blueprint for what proponents view as more just economic exchanges. The retail price of fair trade certified goods is higher than that of their non-certified counterparts and a price guarantee exists to insulate the producers of such goods from the vagaries of global commodity markets.

The first certified trading relations were established between coffee growers/coffee growing cooperatives, trade groups, and coffee roasters. These exchanges were based in social movement action directed at changing the structurally uneven conditions of trade and production and were also movements in solidarity with oppressed groups (Bacon 2013). Simultaneously, as pressure to adopt voluntary labeling standards such as organic and fair trade emerged, fair trade certification started to be used as a market-based tool of governance and regulation (Jaffee 2012; see also: Guthman 2007; Mutersbaugh 2005a&b). Whether promoting or critiquing fair trade there are common themes and debates that are drawn across widely-cited literature on fair trade certification. Fair trade is often discussed as an alternative form of exchange designed to benefit producers and provide opportunities for participation in moral or solidarity economies for consumers. In the next few paragraphs I offer a brief review of scholarly efforts to examine fair trade under these themes.

Fair trade is commonly described as an alternative commodity network, which challenges conventional trade while strengthening links between producers and consumers (Bacon et al. 2008; Jaffee 2014; Reynolds 2000; 2002). Goodman, notes that the narratives offered by certifiers ‘shouted’ the alternative character of fair trade at consumers (2004:893). Indeed, the ‘alternative’ character of certified exchange was used by scholars as a way to explain the form and function of certification and as a site for asking questions about the benefits of fair trade.

Moreover, literature on fair trade as an alternative broadened the scope of research to a global scale where previously it often was restricted to localized, direct connections of exchange (Raynolds 2000).

Drawing on Polyani (1957), fair trade is used as way to examine the possibilities of socially re-embedding markets (Bacon 2004; 2010; Jaffee 2014; Lyon 2011; Raynolds 2012; Renard 2003). This lens is used to understand how fair trade markets are shaped by social and political institutions. In examining fair trade as a site of social relations, scholars question how ‘alternative’ fair trade is, analyzing the institutionalization, increased corporate involvement, and mainstreaming of certification and certified products over the past few decades (Dolan 2010; Guthman 2007; Howard and Jaffee 2013; Jaffee 2012; Low and Davenport 2005; Raynolds 2009; Renard 2005). Despite a framing as alternative to capitalism, as Dolan (2010) points out, the moral claims of fair trade mask its neoliberal logics.² These critiques are salient, as both Guthman (2007) and Lyon (2015) point to certified exchanges as being a form of ‘caring capitalism.’

Early research on fair trade portrayed the arrival of a market for exchange that significantly improved the lives of producers through the control of volatile prices (Raynolds 2002). Although initially presented as a panacea for producers, scholars began to examine this market in a critical way. Concentrating on whether fair trade was working as intended and how certified trade impacted producer livelihoods and communities, scholars began to ask questions about the benefits of the system (Bacon 2004; 2005; Dolan 2008; 2010; Fridell 2007; Jaffee 2014; Lyon 2011). A key finding of many studies was that while fair trade certification was important as a safety-net for producers, it was not a significant boon for income earning. Crucially, this point led scholars to raise further questions about the efficacy of fair trade in

valuing people and working toward social justice in a trading system that has as its foundation binaries of ‘wealthy’ consumers and ‘marginalized’ producers (Getz and Shreck 2006).

The history of fair trade that is drawn on to explain it as a potential site for ethical exchange includes long-standing solidarity organizing that is ongoing between groups to facilitate more direct forms of trade (Bacon 2013). Such “fairer” trade is described by scholars as putting people before profit and as a form of solidarity through alternative forms of exchange (Fisher 2007; Renard 2003). A strong focus continues to detail the ideologies of consumption and how consumers understand and engage the fair trade marketplace (Goodman 2004; Lyon 2006). Third-party certifiers continue to draw on social justice narratives to enfold consumers into conscientious consumption, something that scholars investigate as a site of moral economy (Goodman 2004; Wilson 2013; Wilson and Curnow 2013). Indeed, there is a substantial literature on consumer motivations for and experiences of purchasing fair trade that outstrips scholarly work on how fair trade is experienced by producers and other practitioners (Fisher 2007). As increased numbers of producers and products are drawn into the certified market, certifiers, such as Fair Trade USA (2012a), argue that this extends benefits, providing ‘fair trade for all,’ simultaneously, others note that such efforts close out small-producers and their voices (Dolan 2010; Renard 2015). As a result scholars identify tensions in the promotion of fair trade as a solidarity movement. Even as fair trade is held up as enacting new forms of political economy many scholars continue to rely on these simplified narratives of fair trade as alternative.

As a result, at the outset of this paper, we must consider the framing of fair trade as an alternative to capitalist exchanges. The vast majority of fair trade literature uses such a framing to describe certified exchanges, and a diverse economies perspective situates fair trade as an

‘alternate market’ (Gibson-Graham 2006b). However, Healy (2009), argues that setting up economic exchanges as alternative does a service to capitalism by reinforcing its discursive hegemony. Holding up fair trade commodity exchanges as alternative both supports capitalist ideologies and practices and makes it a referent for capitalist exchanges. It is not viewed as an economic exchange in its own right, but as capitalism’s potential other. Furthermore, it obscures the complexity of fair trade exchanges, and approaches we might take to understanding them as multiple and diverse. By re-reading fair trade, not as an alternative, but as a site of exchange within potential community economies, new forms of analysis are possible. My intervention is not to point at fair trade and argue that certified exchanges reify capitalism, on the contrary, here, I move away from simplified discussions of fair trade as alternative to illuminate the complex, messy, and multiple economic exchanges that occur at the site of certified fair trade and consider who benefits.

Diverse and Community Economies

Fair trade exchanges are just one example of so-called “alternatives” to capitalism, which sit alongside informal economies, barter exchanges, social reproduction, and otherwise non-counted/calculable labor and economic practices. In the mid-1990s, writing from a feminist, post-structuralist perspective Gibson-Graham put forward an anti-essentialist theory of economies, which attempted to recognize this othering through retheorizing economies. This retheorizing, rejects a capitalist economy as the main referent for all economic activity. Such “capitalocentrism” (Gibson-Graham 1996:6; 40-43) privileges a particular performance of economy that invisibilizes actually existing economies that are happening within, alongside, and outside capitalism. Gibson-Graham’s theory of economic difference put forward in 1996 created

a space for reframing economies and thinking about how, collectively, ‘humans and non-human others’ can live well (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). This reframing stands in opposition to a hegemonic capitalist framing that maintains that economic growth and profit are essential to economic wellbeing (ibid).

From this theory of economic difference has emerged community economies. Community economies are articulated as spaces of collective action where, in striving to create livable worlds, groups are actively reshaping their economic practices, identities, and exchanges. Proponents of community economies encourage research and action predicated on an ethic of care, which is concerned with opening up possibilities for living well and equitably, distributing surplus in a way that enriches communities, being mutually supportive and caring, investing in the future, and consuming sustainably (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013:xviii-xix).³ However, some argue that localized studies of diverse and community economies do not link back up with scalar processes, practices, and politics, thereby neglecting the influence that they (may) have (Reynolds and Cohen 2016; see also: Glassman 2003; Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2015; Kelly 2005; Laurie 2005; Lawson 2005). Investigating transnational fair trade exchanges is one of many potential approaches that can be taken to consider how localized examples of economic difference harness larger-scale processes and practices.

There is a risk too in romanticizing diverse economies as Samers argues that not all sites of diverse exchange (such as the “informal economy”) are “progressive” and calls for a more “analytical politics of diverse economies” (2005:883). However, a community economy approach opens up possibilities for investigating social relations in exchange across scale and practice as community economy groupings are not bound by geographical location or particular social groupings (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2011; Snyder and St. Martin 2015). The

reframing of economies in this way renders visible new and existing social formations around exchange. Scholars suggest that there is no clearly defined meaning or single strategy for creating community economies. It is foremost a theory of difference that through action research and teaching attempts to make more visible myriad economic activities, identities, and performances at multiple, non-hierarchical scales.

Here I use a diverse and community economies framing to not only elucidate economic difference in fair trade exchanges, but to also work towards developing an apparatus for understanding different articulations of power as diverse economic identities, practices, and exchanges occur. This effort is meant to contribute to Samers' call for an "analytical politics" that is attentive to the more hopeful and positive performance of community economies while also differentiating them from more mundane livelihood struggles (2005:883). Additionally, I offer a discussion of a potential community that is networked across space and systems of power that are transnational. To do this, I unsettle exchanges in fair trade certified coffee chains, which are identified in the broader diverse economies framework as an "alternative market" (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). Returning to Healy's (2009) critique, I want to suggest that fair trade exchanges are in practice not "alternative" at all. I do this for two reasons: first, to re-assert the critique that in naming something alternative we are essentializing economic practices and creating capitalism's other; and second, to disrupt the idea that coffee consumers (e.g. those individuals who are purchasing certified coffee) are participating in a nominally different exchange as fair trade certified purchases relate to their daily economic practices. However, dismissing the idea of 'alternative' does not thereby reject economic difference. Instead, it multiplies the possibilities for how we produce knowledge about economic exchanges and power relations within them. In this paper I acknowledge the critiques launched by fair trade and

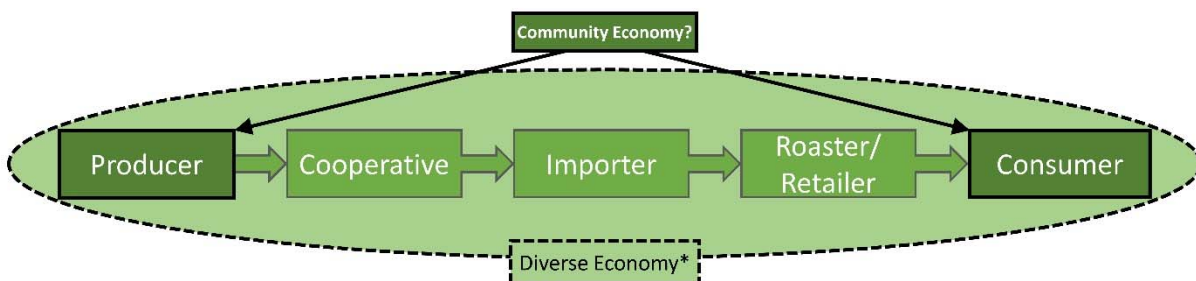
diverse economies scholars, yet, consistent with the reframing advocated by Gibson-Graham et al. (2017) I aim to step aside and examine fair trade not as a capitalist or alter-capitalist undertaking, or determine whether it is working for producers, but instead consider the possibilities of a diverse site of exchange between disparate actors to think through fair trade differently.

Imagined Communities, Asymmetrical Relationships

In intervening in the common narratives deployed to discuss fair trade, I focus here on claims to promote consumer-producer solidarity, while also dislocating fair trade as an alternative to capitalism. This focus is consistent with evaluating the relationships of market exchange, between those who give and those who receive (Gibson-Graham et al. 2017).

Although disputed and critiqued, the narrative of fair trade exchanges connecting the producer and consumer is long-standing in academic and popular literature on fair trade. The simplified commodity chain written by fair trade starts at the producer and ends at the consumer. Figure one is a simplified look at the commodity chain that is meant to replicate those often advertised by third-party certifiers.

Figure 1: Simplified Fair Trade Commodity Chain



* Gibson-Graham (2006b:79)

Consumers in the U.S. and Europe can now purchase thousands of products that are certified by a seemingly equal number of third-party certifiers. Of these products (e.g. bananas, cocoa, tea), coffee makes up the largest share of the fair trade certified market (Howard and Jaffee 2013). The sale of certified coffee through the fair trade market is intended to reduce the nodes in the commodity supply chain thereby putting more income in the hands of coffee growers. If this economic practice fits in the community + economy model as Gibson-Graham et al. (2017) infer, then how can we understand exchanges of coffee in fair trade certified networks? Ultimately, in cultivating community economies, questions about life and livelihood are intended to prevail over those of wealth and accumulation. If, as Gibson-Graham et al. suggest, “our economy is the outcome of the decisions we make and the actions we take” (2013:xiii), what manner of relationship are we to have through coffee as producers and consumers? In their earlier work on reframing the economy Gibson-Graham point to fair trade networks as sites where economic relations are resocialized (2006b:79). A diverse economies framing recognizes fair trade networks as potential sites of community economies, yet the interdependence and care amongst the actors within these sites appears uneven; as these exchanges *are predicated on the existence of a marginalized producer* (Manokha 2004; Naylor 2014).

Gibson-Graham et al. argue that “in a community economy what gets negotiated is how all parties (including our earth others) are impacted by the process of exchanging goods and services inside the market and out” (2017:15). A community economy is meant to be a space that opens up possibilities for considering how people throughout the exchange can live well. The continued expansion of fair and direct trade networks is posited as a possible sign that consumers are seeking a greater and more just connection to people and place. This pursuit may signal the

creation of an interdependent network. However, the emphasis on the consumer seeking a connection points to an asymmetry in building community around economic exchanges.

Drawing on Anderson's (1983) concept of the imagined community—where it is “imagined” because it is impossible for everyone to meet, however, everyone feels that they are part of a whole—Lyon argues that advertising in fair trade “unevenly unites producers and consumers;” such advertising provides a “fair trade mirror in which consumers’ fantasies about producers’ lives are reflected back to them in their coffee cups” (2011:181). The very images that are linked with fair trade producers, and which may adorn the walls of coffee shops or coffee bags provide a seeming proximity of a community centered on the exchange of coffee, while simultaneously perpetuating a homogenous group of producers. Fair trade purchases are considered sites of ethical and informed decision-making, however, such sites of consumption effectively romanticize and commodify the producer (Varul 2008).

Fair trade certified exchange is based in cultivating a particular imaginary of coffee production (small-scale, sustainable, fair wages, community development, producer empowerment). Not only does this come from advertising, but also through price-setting and standards for production and community development. The fair trade certification label becomes the site of decision-making for the coffee consumer, while the practices and performance of this exchange place the burden on the producer and producer cooperatives to meet standards for production. Fair trade labels serve to de-fetishize and re-fetishize coffee production (Fridell 2007; Lyon 2006), providing images that allow non-producers to capture a generalizable idea of what may lie behind their cup of coffee, while also masking the actually existing conditions of production under fair trade standards and the particulars of place where their coffee originated.

Fair trade exchanges are predicated on unequal relations between a “consuming north” and “producing south,” which effectively calls on an ethical commitment by a ‘wealthy consumer’ to purchase commodities from an ‘impoverished producer’ (Naylor 2014:277). This practice too, is tied to specific attempts to manage and control the behavior of producers and their cooperatives through standards for community development (Lyon 2011; Naylor 2014; 2017a). As a result, there are then multiple ideas of ‘community’ at play. As part of their participation coffee consumers are enfolded into an imaginary producer-consumer community whereby their perceived participation takes place not only through imbibing coffee, but also through their purchase, improving the daily life of their extended ‘community’ of producers, which now reaches beyond an individual producer family, across and through the homes and fields of distant others.

The reality of how exchanges happen disrupts the imagined community between individual coffee purchasers and coffee growers. Consumer practices fall on the margins of fair trade networks. Consumers are not dependent on any particular producer for either their coffee or their ethical purchasing. Their performance is bound to purchasing a gourmet or luxury item that could come from any number of possible producers.⁴ Moreover, the “life and livelihood” (community economies) versus “wealth and accumulation” (capitalist) measure within this producer-consumer community is asymmetrical, meaning different things for disparate groups. In the fair trade exchange imaginary one group is using their accumulated wealth to facilitate the life and livelihood of another group. The purchases of coffee at a premium tend not to create financial strain on the part of the purchaser, yet the greater share of income being retained by the producer tends to allow them to stand in place financially.

If community economies are premised on seeking possibilities for building equality and interdependence, then the asymmetrical relations of fair trade exchanges appear antithetical. This does not come as a particular surprise, but is instead consistent with seeking to understand economic exchange in its multiplicity and fluidity—or how possibilities are opened up (or not) for overcoming uneven relations. Cameron, drawing on Gibson-Graham (2006b:xv), notes that “far from an idealized image of the world, negotiating these interdependencies and building community economies is understood as involving ‘struggle, uncertainty, ambivalence, and disappointment’” (2015:54). Again this reflection points to there being no one right way to construct a community economy. Although it begs the question: disappointment for whom? I suggest that the asymmetrical relations between the individuals making an ethical commitment to support fair trade certification through coffee purchases and those who are cultivating coffee and negotiating its sale as part of the fair trade certified marketplace point to these struggles, uncertainties, ambivalences and disappointments, while also demonstrating multiple meanings and understandings of community economies and broadening the foundation for rethinking power relations within sites of diverse economies. So, even as I critique the so-called alternatives and producer-consumer relations of fair trade, I want to simultaneously open up opportunities for thinking about different communities and power relations that exist on the fair trade spectrum.

Fair Trade Exchanges and Community Economies?

Between 2010-2013 I worked with two coffee cooperatives in Chiapas, Mexico (for the purposes of this paper I will refer to them as the Chiapas cooperatives).⁵ This ethnographically-informed fieldwork in the highlands formed part of a larger project working with subsistence and fair trade coffee farmers on indigenous resistance and autonomy in the region (Naylor 2017b).

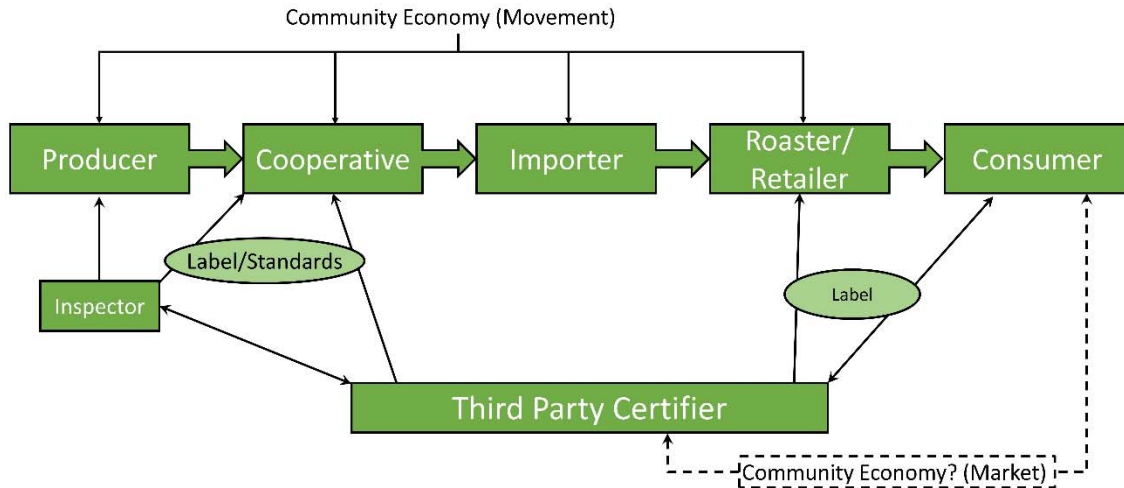
The empirical work drawn into this paper is the result of extensive participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis with coffee-producing cooperatives, coffee producers, and fair trade-related media.

Both of the cooperatives I worked with are populated by subsistence corn cultivators who grow coffee as one strategy to earn cash to support their subsistence livelihoods. These cooperatives are democratically organized and managed, they grow under organic standards and their coffee is certified or sold as fair trade in the United States. What sets these cooperatives apart is their emergence out of social movements that are struggling for autonomy and actively opposing the state. Each cooperative was formed by groups who consider themselves “in resistance” and who are striving for autonomy from official governments in Mexico. There is a longer history of organizing and social movement action that forms the backbone of the resistance embodied by coffee cooperative members that I will not delve into here.⁶ However, it is important to note that even though producers in the region have been farming coffee as part of organized cooperatives since the 1960s, the Chiapas cooperatives were formed out of social movements and serve as important sites of their resistance. The sale of coffee through international fair trade networks while important for household income is not limited to it. It is essential to understand that this resistance does not happen in isolation. The Chiapas cooperatives are under consistent threat from government and paramilitary forces and the networks that they have built within and beyond Chiapas are critical to their movements, notwithstanding their ability to sell coffee.

Here I highlight the experience of the Chiapas cooperatives, not as an in-depth case study, but as an example of the practice of fair trade as economic difference and as a potential site of building equality and interdependence within a community economy. The coffee sold

through international fair trade networks links the Chiapas cooperatives to coffee roasting cooperatives in the United States who do not blend their coffee into obscurity, but instead sell it as single origin under various headings of Zapatista Coffee, Peace Coffee, and by the individual names of the cooperatives as well. That their coffee is being sold not with a story of better wages and livelihoods, but with a story of resistance and struggle distinguishes it. It is not generalizable with other coffees sold under the fair trade label, but instead connects the coffee to a specific place and a specific group of people. This relation is what motivated the farmer to tell me that their “coffee sends a message.” In this section I suggest a different set of community power relations through fair trade exchange. One that goes beyond the imagined community of producer-consumer, and instead looks to other links in the chain to see a potential dyad of community economies. There are a number of other actors within this network (see: Mutersbaugh 2016:5), however, with few exceptions other nodes in the fair trade commodity chain are not subject to the same standards nor scrutiny as producers. The power relations of the commodity exchange are caught up in capitalist dynamics, yet if we view the chain in this way exclusively we may miss other possible connections and exchanges. In the two sections that follow I offer two examples of how fair trade is ‘done’ within this dyad. Figure two, builds on simplified mock-up of the fair trade commodity chain—I draw the reader’s attention to the changes from Figure one—particularly where and how the community economy is drawn into the network.

Figure 2: Simplified Dyad of Fair Trade Exchanges



“Connected by Coffee”

The Chiapas cooperatives are made up of subsistence producers. They are coffee growers, but this label is limiting. Yes they grow coffee, and they also grow the *milpa* (corn, beans, and squash) for subsistence. They may additionally plant kitchen gardens and harvest non-timber forest products for household food, fiber, and fuel. They are first and foremost corn growers who define themselves as “in resistance,” and their agricultural practices and transnational relations ground this struggle. Producers participating in fair trade exchanges are meeting their needs through a diversity of economic practices, not solely as producers of coffee. The fair trade label renders the existence of these producers static, fixing them in place as the personification of a litany of keywords tied to coffee production, and capitalist framings of economic improvement, and empowerment. Re-reading the economic practices of producers for difference (instead of as capitalist practice) creates a foundation for considering how the resistance being enacted by the Chiapas cooperatives forms the basis of the exchanges that take place along the fair trade network that they are a part of.

Producers embody the debates about how to live well and how to address exploitative labor relations and uneven value creation. When I asked producers if they thought growing

coffee was a good idea, generally the response was that it was an economic strategy. As a direct response to this question, one farmer remarked: “we produce coffee, but you can’t eat that, but you can get a little money for it.” The production of coffee was viewed by another producer as part of the “economic base” of the household. Yet many coffee growers also complained about the price of coffee in fair trade certified systems, citing that it was too low. I asked if they thought it was “fair,” one producer explained: “I think it is not very fair. The price of the coffee is terrible...it doesn’t help us. The price of coffee in this case, this year is very low and it doesn’t help. Even when we pay for the certification every year, the price is still very low.” The sharp changes in the commodity price for coffee are still acutely felt by producers—even when the market price does not drop below the fair trade price floor. Yet simultaneously, when I discussed the changes in price with both individual producers and the leadership of the cooperatives the response to the question of what would be a better price was consistent. Producers suggested that the highest price they had ever received would be the best. In a conversation with the treasurer of one cooperative I posed the question of a best price, they remarked: “people need a better price for their coffee, when the price is low they are discouraged and they know that there will not be money to pay for things...last year, the forty-eight pesos [per kilo], that was best. That would be a good price.”⁷ If the relation to producing coffee for the certified market is to price and the price is not viewed favorably, what is the impetus for farmers? In the case of producers in the Chiapas cooperatives the relation to price is their relation to the function of one part of a multi-pronged strategy to build dignified livelihoods. I asked the producers about this strategizing and one producer replied: “It is a way to get money and we have done it before the struggle [against the government] and we have done it as part of the struggle.” The Chiapas cooperatives were created out of the struggles of the producers and they are a site for that resistance. This extends ideas of

life and livelihood beyond income and economic development and toward building interdependence, dignified existence, and a foundation for living well.

In detailing the imagined community of the producer and consumer, Lyon describes the arrival of U.S.-based Green Mountain Coffee Roasters to coffee growing communities in Guatemala, where they took photos and videos for use on their company website, and argues that even such visits perpetuate the unevenness of the fair trade exchange, noting that the material produced essentializes the growers (2011:201-203). In trying to make visible coffee growers as part of the larger fair trade community their lives and livelihood struggles are exposed in a way that makes them appear dependent on the fair trade network, the imagined community, the coffee consumer. In the wake of the split between Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International a growing concern of fair trade coffee roasters was how to distinguish themselves from ‘business as usual’ (Naylor 2014). There were a series of responses from groups in the U.S. who remained committed to the principles of the fair trade movement (e.g. addressing structurally uneven relations of trade). One such response was a reflexive moment on the part of two coffee roasters who launched a one-thousand-mile tour from Southern Mexico through El Salvador. This journey, called the *Fair Trade Chronicles* was driven by the question: “has our work really helped coffee farmers?” (Earley 2013:np). The two representatives were Matt Earley from Just Coffee (Madison, WI), and Chris Treter from Higher Grounds (Traverse City, MI), both of these roasters purchase coffee from the Chiapas cooperatives. When asked about their connection to coffee, both discuss justice and solidarity. In the case of Treter, Higher Grounds was begun out of a desire to create a solidarity network with one of the cooperatives in Chiapas, which had experienced horrific violence at the hands of state-sponsored paramilitary groups. Likewise, Just Coffee Cooperative (co-founded by Earley) was founded to purchase coffee grown by Zapatista

producers in Chiapas. Neither roaster existed until a partnership was struck in the highlands to create a connection through the exchange of coffee. The relationships forged cannot extend throughout the entire producer community as the Chiapas cooperatives have members across dozens of community locations, however, the *Chronicles* were an attempt to extend personal relationships beyond the leadership groups of the coffee roasting and coffee producing cooperatives. It is already custom that the leadership work closely together throughout the year, creating sites of economic, educational, and cultural exchange, which may take many forms, such as: facilitating visits to the United States for coffee producers, negotiating a price bump in addition to the market or fair trade price, or providing information and on-the-ground intervention for diseased coffee plants.

The *Chronicles* were the site of blogging, social media posts, short videos, and the culmination was a documentary film: *Connected by Coffee* (Dennis 2013). In these spaces stories were told, hardships examined, and hard ‘truths’ confronted. All of these outputs were ultimately directed at the consumer, as a way to distinguish the differences between those groups, which are still connected to social justice activism to make trade fairer. Yet they were also potential sites for reclaiming fair trade exchanges along different nodes in the commodity chain through deepening the connection between the producers and roasters.

For the roasters who participated in the *Chronicles* it has “never been about coffee.” It is about building long-term relationships based on respect, dignity, and equality and forging solidarity between grower cooperatives and roasters. What came from this trip, from their conversations with coffee farmers was an acknowledgement that fair trade does not work as it was intended to (Earley 2013). It has not ‘lifted people out of poverty,’ facilitated ‘community-wide development,’ or ‘connected producers and consumers.’ It does not address the very agenda

that is continuously heralded by proponents of fair trade. If fair trade exchanges have not met the broader goals of the movement why continue to have such exchanges? Why continue to participate? If we only look to fair trade certified exchanges as regulated commodity sales in a capitalist market, if we do not look past wealth and accumulation then fair trade will always fail to meet the expectations that were set, it will always be a ‘disappointment.’

What the *Chronicles* demonstrate is that in an effort to create more just forms of exchange it cannot just be at one site (e.g. coffee, a label, a project), there must be a set of multiple and diverse interactions. It suggests that we must ask questions about the type of economic exchanges we want to participate in, about how we want to bring meaning or not to our economic practices and performances. The economic exchange that prioritizes life and livelihood over wealth and accumulation is more likely the one between the coffee growing cooperatives and the coffee roasters. These groups establish relationships, co-create knowledge, tell stories, share food, and of course, coffee; and speak to the possibilities of community economies.

During my fieldwork in Chiapas there were almost no mentions of coffee consumers (those ‘ethically-minded’ purchasers of coffee) by coffee growers. The connections that were emphasized in the context of conversations about fair trade were almost exclusively related to the grower cooperative and/or to the coffee roasters. In a conversation about the benefits of fair trade, one producer explained to me that it was based in relationships, that certification was more of a burden: “...it [fair trade] is hard for the small producer, without certification is best, but we have our buyers and we have a good and long relationship with them, so it is okay, it works.” In a different conversation another example of these connections was offered: “...even though the price changes in the world we have our price and we have the cooperative, which is better...and

it is better than the *coyotes*.” These comments and the experiences of the *Chronicles*, suggest that there is a proximity between, among, and through these groups (even as they are tied to the power relations embedded in certified exchanges).

As the Chiapas cooperatives struggle to remain visible under threat, sharing their stories through the sale of coffee is one strategy. As the coffee roasters seek to build a movement for change and justice they also build relationships with coffee growing cooperatives, their reflexivity points to an identification of the failures of both free and fair trade and rather than romanticize certification it is used as a platform to facilitate solidarity relations. Although these actors may not describe themselves as enacting economic difference, I argue that these exchanges suggest, at least, a possibility for thinking through fair trade differently and at best, a recognition that there is no one right way, no universal solution, only multi-pronged strategies for trying to create livable worlds.

“Fairest of Them All”

The imagined producer-consumer community, asymmetrical as it is, produces a buy and let live foundation for ethical consumerism. Studies find that consumers are motivated to buy fair trade coffee because they agree that it provides a living wage and better working conditions for farm workers (Darian et al. 2015). While coffee growers are subject to “rigorous standards” (Fruend 2017) for production, consumers of fair trade products are told to ‘look for the label’ to do their part. Third-party certifiers attempt to create a proximity between producers and consumers through advertising, yet they effectively become the stand-in for the producer. The proximity in these exchanges may then exist between the certifier and the consumer. To facilitate

a greater share of the market, third-party certifiers seek to make consumers aware of fair trade products and the impact of participating in fair trade markets.

For over a decade now October has been celebrated as “Fair Trade Month;” similar to other month-long campaigns in the United States, it is focused on awareness. It is described by Fair Trade USA (2012b:np) as a time where:

...ethically-minded consumers, retailers and brands will unite to celebrate and promote Fair Trade. A variety of education events, in-store sampling programs and online initiatives have been planned to help increase awareness and sales of Fair Trade Certified products, ultimately leading to greater impact for farmers and workers in developing countries.

It is an opportunity to bring more consumers into the fair trade fold, and third-party certifiers encourage consumers to buy certified products, have fair trade-themed Halloween parties, and to engage with fair trade organizations on social media. There are also competitions and prizes for participation. This example is perhaps one of the most egregious possible examples of the asymmetries in the fair trade network. Yet what I point out here, is not only the gross inequality between people consuming fair trade certified products and those producing them, but the privilege of participation and the connection between the certifier and the consumer.

In 2016, Fairtrade America ran a campaign for fair trade month called “Fairest of Them All,” in which consumers were invited to take a test to determine how “fair” they were. The results would then be used to determine which state in the U.S. was the “fairest” (ultimately Colorado won). In describing this campaign, spokesperson for Fairtrade America, Kyle Freund is quoted: “The term ‘fairness’ means different things to different people. We want to start a discussion and get people thinking about their personal values and how they play out in everyday situations...” (2016:np). The questions on the quiz were focused, not on equity or just market-based exchange, but instead on etiquette in long lines, how to approach closing subway doors,

and whether you might lie about being sick to take a day off of work. Quiz takers were encouraged to take a fair trade pledge, where they could be entered to win fair trade products as prizes.

At the end of the quiz, takers are applauded on their “fairness” and received the following message:

You’re literally a champion. You’re our kind of person. There’s fairness coursing through your beautiful veins, you’ve done your state proud, and you deserve to be cuddled forever.

Do you want to be even more fair?... yes, we know, that’s crazy given your performance here, but hear us out! Buying Fairtrade goods like chocolate, tea, clothes, coffee and ice cream doesn’t just guarantee dang awesome eats and threads, it means you can feel satisfied in the knowledge that they were produced responsibly, and that the farmers got a fair deal. You can’t get fairer than that!⁸

In quizzing people on their everyday responses to long lines or a store being out of their favorite brand, and subtly reminding them that they are participating in a more just *market* these activities serve to invisibilize other nodes in the fair trade network. Although the campaign also highlighted “fairness stories” that challenged people to think about fairness in their communities by seeing what fair work, fair trade, and organizing can accomplish, this type of advertising still masks the structural issues that the fair trade *movement* seeks to address.

Alongside Fairtrade America, competing third-party certifier Fair Trade USA (2016), ran a similar campaign, titled: “Fair Moments,” where consumers were tasked with taking photos related to their fair trade consumption and using social media, tagging them with the hashtag #FairMoments. The campaign on social media gave examples of how everyday moments with fair trade goods might look. One example shows an ostensibly white, heterosexual, married couple being served breakfast in bed by their children, the accompanying caption reads: “@myfairfamily 8:00am Coffee, banana bread, AND flowers? Quality time with the kids? Pinch

me. #FairMoments #thankful.” There are six fair trade certified items identified in the photo, from the cotton bedsheets to the coffee. This heteronormative look at how people might use their fair trade purchases in their everyday lives fits the picture of the “wealthy northern consumer” that through living out their daily lives are able to make possible the lives of others. A grand prize winner in the campaign was promised fair trade home goods that would retail for four-thousand U.S. dollars; to offer a perspective within the broader fair trade ‘community,’ this amount is often more than four times the *annual* earnings of small-scale coffee producers in the Chiapas cooperatives.

These awareness campaigns focused squarely on the consumer. There were no simultaneous campaigns for fair trade producers. What this suggests is that fair trade consumers are cultivating their own fair trade exchanges. Third-party certifiers put the emphasis on the consumer—as part of their 2016 campaigns Fairtrade America incited consumers to believe in the “power of you,” and Fair Trade USA asked consumers to consider “how do you live your values?” In part, these types of campaigns are a piece of building the imagined community that Lyon (2011) describes. Yet, rather than create proximity with producers, they reinforce distance. At the same time, they are asking about the ‘world that we want to live in’ and how we might become ‘ethical economic subjects.’ The friction that exists in considerations of fair trade as a diverse economy, is in their shaping of consumption within capitalist markets; in putting a glossy veneer over what remains as capitalist relations for these consumers, fair trade exchanges lose their transformative power. Fair trade products are branded as alternative forms of consumption and in this branding they become the “kinder, gentler form of business as usual” described by Lyon (2015:162).

The buy and let live of ethical consumerism is reliant on the third-party certifier, the label, and the brand. Differences exist between the actors in these exchanges; the community formed between the coffee producing cooperatives and the coffee roasters—where the roasters and producers attempt to attach a deeper set of social relations to place and to struggles for life and livelihood—and the community created by third-party certifiers that connects them to consumers and encourages them to use their purchasing power for ‘good.’

Concluding Remarks

In considering how to make livable worlds, market-based exchanges are a critical site. In this paper I provided an example of the asymmetries in the fair trade movement and market through addressing the possibilities of community economies. As the fair trade market is mainstreamed and consumers and third-party certifiers normalize fair trade as capitalist practice, fair trade movement practices are pushed to the margins while market performances are placed at the center. Here I have drawn out multiple exchanges of fair trade to both complicate understandings of fair trade as “alternative” and most importantly to provide an analytic of community economies that displays the messiness and unevenness of building livable worlds, something that becomes increasingly complex as it moves away from localized examples to the site of transnational exchanges.

In the fair trade exchanges I documented in Chiapas, there appears to be a socially-minded community economy between coffee growing cooperatives and coffee roasters as they attempt to build relationships and work together to think about how to build communities that can live well (although they are still mired in unbalanced privilege). While both producers and roasters recognize that the pricing and standards for production and development in fair trade do

not effectively change the social relations of trade even in a certified market, they continue to participate in these exchanges. The relationships that are built on the economic exchanges of coffee that is certified fair trade are spaces where interdependence is in the process of becoming. Yet, as demonstrated by the example of the Fair Trade Month campaigns, coffee consumers and third-party certifiers, taking on a trustee role (Naylor 2017a) work to ‘care at a distance’ for a real or imagined producer, rather than participating in mutually beneficial relations.

Interdependence is a site of friction in fair trade exchanges. This friction signals that we must move beyond simplified explanations of fair trade as an alternative to capitalism that benefits ‘marginalized’ producers, and creates solidarity between producers and consumers through economic exchange. The buy and let live of ethical consumption for coffee consumers is dependent on a fixed producer subject. Put differently, to participate in an ‘alternative and solidarity’ economic exchange mediated by certification, it is essential to have a “needy producer” to make possible the care by the “wealthy consumer.” Observing the dyad of community economies in fair trade exchanges, what stands out is the interdependence, not between producer and consumer in the production and consumption of fair trade certified goods, but other interdependencies. The third-party certifier and consumer appear to be interdependent, the certifiers requiring a consumer to purchase their wares and the consumer relying on the third-party certifier to provide knowledge about its brand and label. However, if fair trade certification disappeared tomorrow the interdependencies of the coffee roasters and coffee growing cooperatives would likely remain similar, and that is a profound difference.

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¹ I directly attribute the idea of “asymmetrical relationships” in community economies to Ryan Galt who workshopped these ideas in conversation with me.

² On other forms of certification see: Auld 2014; Bartley 2003; Bennett 2017; Brown and Getz 2008; Guthman 2007; Hatanaka and Busch 2008; Mutersbaugh 2002; 2004; 2005; Ponte and Gibbon 2005.

³ See: Buttle 2008; Cameron et al. 2014; Diprose 2016; Dixon 2011; Dombroski et al. 2016; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2011; Healy 2014; Hill 2011; Krueger et al. 2017; Miller 2014; North 2015; Roelvink et al. 2015; Shear 2010; St. Martin 2007.

⁴ In the case of coffee, through the new Fair Trade USA campaign “fair trade for all,” this community now extends from democratically run farmer cooperatives to laborers on coffee plantations.

⁵ Concurrent with the request of one of the cooperatives I worked with, I will not refer to the cooperatives by name. All interviews in Chiapas were conducted in Spanish (or with Tsotsil to Spanish translation) and were translated to English by the author.

⁶ I am referring to the Zapatista and Las Abejas social movements, which have been in public view since the 1990s and are distinct movements for indigenous autonomy and recognition. For a deeper discussion see: Collier and Quaratiello 2005; Harvey 1998; Mora 2017; Naylor 2017b; Nash 2001; Stahler-Sholk 2010; 2015; Stephen 2002; Tavanti 2003.

⁷ 48 pesos is about \$2.70 at the time of writing, equaling \$2.70 per kilo or \$1.22 per pound.

⁸ For “selfish” answers, a negative response can also be triggered: “You don’t believe that the fair way is the right way. You believe there’s no “Team” in “I”. You’re just out to get ahead and you don’t care how you do it. That’s okay buddy, it wouldn’t be “fair” of us to blame you.”