Inaccessible Interpolated Imagery: How coffee farmers in the state of Chiapas might access political economic opportunity through representation

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Inaccessible Interpolated Imagery:

How coffee farmers in the state of Chiapas might

access political economic opportunity through representation

“every human being in the village is an ever-opening story
yes you must write about each one — it is the bravest gesture”

- Juan Felipe Herrera

Abstract

Here is a useful parable to boil down the idea of this project and set the tone: when one goes to the bar to tell a story about a fight at the bar, they would never venture to place themselves as the hero of the brawl, taking out three drunkards in a single punch, unless they were really in the bar, at that time, fighting a good fight. One would never do this as the bartender, locals, and regulars would all know if this were the case or not. Yet transnational corporations, governments, and even consumers do this all the time — pretend they are “storytellers” of tales they have no part of or place in. This research project and thesis wrestles with the idea that these third parties reduce opportunity for those whose livelihoods are at stake in such stories. Enter coffee farmers, a commodity-producing section of the world who may be the most bastardized in corporate “storytelling.” Commercial interests claiming to tell the stories
of farmers are actually inserting representations of farmers that are aimed at appealing to consumers, and they do so in a myriad of creative ways: dirty hands, nameless faces beneath sombreros, unethical representation in the name of fair trade; historical expansion and decimation are woven into the framings and semiotics of Native and Indigenous peoples who grow coffee.

The research presented in this thesis points to innovative tactics, economic models, and strategies that not only serve coffee farmers but can also create political economic opportunities for commodity producers. Paulo Freire, Edward Said, and Franz Fanon would call this dominant narration and knowledge power — stories from the farmers that subvert corporate “storytelling” would be counter-narration. The coffee farmers who are members of the Chiapas-grown Yomol A’tel cooperative, the vast majority of whom are Tseltal Mayan, sell their beans to an organization that is about as ethical as can be when it comes to narration, finding legitimate and respectful ways to have the stories of their members heard around the world.

Yet not even this cooperative could escape the trappings of COVID-19, international trade, and the perils of climate change. What does the future look like for coffee farmers in an organization that prioritizes counter-narration, finds clever and alternative modes and economies to push their agenda? And what does the future look like for the companies who aren’t even trying? This paper will explore testimony of dozens of coffee farmers in and around the Mexican city of Chilón as a case study in understanding the real impacts of narration while unpacking what it means for traumatic events like COVID-19 and climate change. The paper will make recommendations for corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs and coffee companies specifically. In my findings I make the claim that this is a necessary paradigm shift for commodity professionals, that there are a myriad of positive tactics to celebrate from Yomol
A’tel, and that there are further economic models and strategies to employ while creating political economic opportunity for commodity producers.
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In that spirit I thank the communities of Tseltal Mayans who allowed me into their churches, production centers, and homes. I still hope that this work, mine which comes only as a fruit from yours, will bring about change for this broken supply chain. Thank you to my driver, Leo, whom I hope can get the resource he deserves for his long hours and miles on the road.

Thank you to my partner and my cat for their long hours listening to me and humoring me.

Figures

Graphic provided by Yomol A’tel (A)

Voices of Yomol A’tel (B)

Pricing table provided by Yomol A’tel (C)

Photos of farmers photographed by author (D)

Figures 1 — 6 from developmental economics research conducted by author (E)

Coffee bags from the cooperative (F)

Photos of farmers (G)
Introduction

Augustine Sedgwick. Dave Eggers. Michael Pollan. The list of white male authors who write the histories of coffee producers goes on and on, and these are only from the last few years. The stories of marginalized populations have always been told by white men (like me!) This, certainly, is unethical. There is a rich, untold world that is often mined for profit. The intersection of stories and economics is subtle, but potent. The history, then, from a counter-narration lens, is quite important to know and understand. Even within businesses and cooperativas outside of the United States aiming to do this work themselves.

Counter-narration is, as Donald Macedo wrote in his foreword to the most recent edition of Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, is a dismantling of the “construction of the invisible.” (Macedo 2018) Hegemonic structures and those perpetuators of hegemony build worlds for those excluded from the dominant political economy to live in: the “welfare queen” of Reagan-era liberalism for Black womxn, or the “super predator” of the Clinton and Biden regimes. In supply chain economics and consumer commodities these political stereotypes are just as prevalent, and the truck we are taking in this position is with the coffee “farmer” image. In this paper I will examine the history of this portrayal and make a case that its intersections with political economy have always been detrimental, even the more “politically correct” concepts proposed by companies and governments.

An important place to begin will be with what narration means, and what therefore dominant and counter narrations look like. The concept is most easily established by Freire, originally for educational pedagogy:
A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness. (Freire, 1970. p. 71)

This maps onto the coffee value chain. The patient and listening objects for our discourse are coffee farmers, pickers, producers, and their communities. The narrating Subject for our purposes is more various: this perpetrator is the multinational coffee corporation (MNC), the people who work for those corporations, and even the consumers of coffee in the mostly global north and west countries that buy the beans.

Dominant narration is explained by Freire as the byproduct of the dominant class, meaning that in their experience as the “haves” rather than the “have nots” they see everything else as disposable and part of their ownership. (Freire, 1970. p. 58) Counter-narration is then, as a concept, not difficult to imagine: when the dominant class “stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor.” (Freire 1970, p. 50) Own-voice is a term to describe counter-narration, or legitimately representative, testimony from a person or community. The problem with this definition is that it still centers the dominant class. Edward Said helps us understand the concept of a dominant narrative by listing “leaders and newspapers” who generate biased stories, and “national narratives” that serve state interests. (Said 1984)
The narrations are powerful. Even in the peer-reviewed, scholarly pieces I just reference in this project, there is a common falsehood stated at the top of many abstracts: that coffee is the world’s second-most traded commodity behind oil. This has never been true. In 2017 it was refuted again by the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) at MIT when they published their findings of global commodity trading: 107th place, trading a total of $30.4 billion that year. For agricultural products alone it still ranks fourth behind wheat, soy, and palm oil. (PCI, 2017)

When we claim an industry or a commodity is doing well by some certain margin, we disallow resources to be properly allocated to certain producers and their communities — if you are a policy maker falsely believing the dominant narrative that coffee is doing so well, why would you vote to move that stimulus package to Colombian coffee farmers when you could allocate it to farmers of some other product, maybe the poor saps farming the 107th most traded commodity? “There is every chance that ignorance…will keep pace with sustained ecomia” writes Said about the way narrative was used to justify economic expansion in Palestine. (Said 1984, 37)

Anna Tsing, political economic theorist studying supply chains and the environment, writes “the evolution of our ‘selves’ is already polluted by histories of encounter: we are mixed up with others before we begin any new collaboration.” (Tsing 2015, p. 29) Are there mustachioed, sombrero-wearing, donkey-riding people who grow coffee? Odds are yes, and there were many who fit this description at Yomol A’tel in Chilón. Yet this image does not evoke “business partner” or “global market actor” in dominant narratives, and this impedes trade for those working in this crop.

These interactions between globalized ideas and real lives, and what emerges, is what Tsing calls “contaminated diversity.” Narration leads to real impact more than we think, and has
direct implications for the outcomes of contaminated diversity. In her own work, she proves this idea with the story of a Japanese American matsutake mushroom picker in Oregon who says “The forests were great until the Asians came.” Internalized racism becomes externalized racism through unconscious bias. (Tsing, 2010. p. 106)

Why is this important? To begin, we know the world is getting warmer. We know capital accumulation is getting tighter and tighter amongst a group of plutarchs in a group of select countries. We know that more people organized in 2020 against oppression and violence worldwide than ever before in any single year in history. This certainly only points toward justice for these populations further and further. The research that needs to be done is obvious: in what ways does counter-narration determine economic opportunity in the political economy for coffee farmers in the Yomol A’tel cooperative in the Chiapas region of Mexico? This project, then, is an applied, praxis-focused endeavor.

How does one come to that question to be interrogated? It’s an integral way to reframe and reclaim for these communities. The pitfalls that are obvious (positionality of the author) are addressed in the methodology section. God willing, the project described here will tip the scales of narration away from “storytelling” toward interpolation, again the idea that commercial interests are simply inserting power-based fabrications rather than allowing farmers to tell their own stories, which is the correct way to understand what is being often done on behalf of communities of coffee growers worldwide.

Methodologies
There are a myriad of ways to understand the best approach to a project as described here. Considering my hopes for the outcome, and considering the ways that have been executed in the past, I believe these tactics are most important.

Case study

Using Yomol A’tel as an example in which to extrapolate meaning is, of course, a case study. It wouldn’t be worth studying the group if it weren’t to implicate something more widely for the industry and the field! For some that would make interesting conjecture, but in the spirit of praxis and an applied methodology it would be unimportant. I spent just shy of a month in Chilón, Mexico describing in great detail the environment, working conditions, living conditions and as many other details as possible. I wrote about the Nuestro Café locations, the consumer-facing portion of the cooperative, in Cuernavaca and Mexico City to help better understand the full value chain for these groups — this will be added to the more than 22 private and group interviews I conducted to create a holistic picture of this case.

Participant observation

While this is touched on in the last section, it bears elaborating. It is important to add this because rather than case study broadly or interviewing specifically, participant observation will be key in understanding the details of this community. The Indigenous workers and their lives are the backbone of this work — their stories are paramount, and not all stories are told verbally. “Show, don’t tell.” I will present this with audio recordings, upon request or in further outgrowths of this project, written files, photos, and in my description of the mechanics of the ongoing work in the groups.

Qualitative interviewing
The crux of the project! Interviewing has been approved by the International Research Board (IRB) and permissions are available upon request. It is almost not worth writing out: qualitative interviewing was critical in capturing people’s stories and accounts of their lives. While not long enough for a full ethnography, these collection of methods has allowed for a more holistic picture of people’s lives in preparing materials for a CSR style campaign that Capeltic or Yomol A’tel may decide to pursue. Workers, families, children, and managers were interviewed. My assistant from Capeltic, Marimar Zarazua, assisted in translating in audio and writing. These interviews were conducted on-site in the Capeltic factory, in las comunidades surrounding Chilón, in workers homes, and in third spaces in the community.

Discourse analysis

The final tool and, in the research process, the last step. Reviewing contemporary work being published on coffee, coffee ethics, CSR projects, farming techniques, and narration will be an important portion. This will allow for the first step — the case study nature of the project — to be added to the project in a significant way. Taking Yomol A’tel and positioning them against lessons learned from other players in the industry will then deliver material results that can be recommended to international development projects, coffee companies, and local and foreign governments.

Limitations

What were the shortcomings of these approaches? I specifically feel that my limitations are 1) my positionality and 2) the necessity of this interjection done in this way. In regards to the former, I have to be aware of the space I take up in my research. As a white man there are a dozen thousand pitfalls in which I might step or have already. I encountered the scenario that, in many research projects across time and space, local peoples defer to academics who come into
their community. Given my cauldrons of privilege, this could not be more dangerous. In the consideration of case study and participant observation, it was most unfortunate any of the times locals looked to me rather than their own histories and stories. As Freire writes, we are “co-investigators,” therefore the project was at its best when I was thoughtful of my limitations. I hoped to get around this issue by hiring a local assistant, in addition to two more guides and translators who spoke Spanish and Tseltal, who could translate both directions.

In regarding the second point, it has been brought to my attention that the biggest limitation of my research is in convincing my audience that it needs be done in this specific way: who cares about this soft, fluffy concept? I am hoping that by bringing in economics and numbers — best seen in my discourse analysis but also in posing questions about money and income that farmers and the company are receiving — this will defend against this limitation. The social sciences always encounter this issue, the reality that the problems are less “hard” than physics, mathematics, etc. Hence the intersection.

**Literature Review**

*Corporate social responsibility (CSR)*

The research that has been done in regards to CSR is vast, more so than one might anticipate. In what feels like a niche or burgeoning division of the corporate world, CSR has an extensive body of work that is traced back to the 1980s. The term has become synonymous in popular culture with a litany of ideas: Washington state’s Social Purpose Corporation (SPC), green-washing, the unicorn Benefit-Corporation (B Corp), or lost somewhere in public relations miasma. At this juncture, attention is appropriately aimed at CSR as it relates to the “planet” piece of John Elkington’s triple bottom line accounting framework. (1994) I believe the time has
come for a proper, in-depth case study research project to examine how corporations enact CSR practices when faced with protecting the environment, or in the case that they failed to do so.

As an overview, Garriga talks about the four dimensions present in all CSR: 1) Instrumental Theories: corporations as an instrument to create wealth and therefore all social activities are a means to create wealth. Here, the corporation is responsible for stakeholders. 2) Political Theories: Corporations hold power within a society and should use this power responsibly in a political arena. 3) Integrative Theories: Corporation is focused on satisfying social demands. 4) Ethical Theories: Corporations have an ethical responsibility to society.

The possible research has barely been scratched when it comes to environmental stewardship specifically, however. It is understood some of the ramifications for multinational corporations have been examined, but, some research, in this capacity it was a question of how anonymous executives of corporations with structures in Pakistan did or did not practice CSR to a success. They contend that CSR research is “scant in the context of developing countries.” and add “On the basis of our findings we conclude that MNCs are manipulating CSR in Pakistan to gain much needed legitimacy; however, their commitment in practice beyond symbolic window dressing can be questioned, particularly if we consider systematically as we have done in this paper their motivations for CSR, and their actual policies, processes, and outcomes of CSR intervention.” (Yunis, Jamali, and Hashim, 2018, p. 16) Though the research is at times only able to draw a causal connection, there is reason to think that especially large companies working in energy production have a high rate of emissions and therefore a greater harm to the environment when they are operating in lower-income areas. (Gouldson, 2006) In the coffee industry, there is a wide body of research showing the impact companies have had on the environment in the coffee-producing countries they look to for their commodity — one farmer in Nicaragua, for
example, said he was down 40 percent of the historic annual yield due to a worsening environment. (Schenck, p. 187—196)

In less academic spaces, much has been said about the work being done by certain corporations for their ethical approach to conservation and environmentalism. Elkington has revisited his original three-pronged approach with some updated numbers. The sustainability sector has now grown to $1 billion, with the U.N. sustainability goals looking to create $12 trillion a year by 2030. Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) data firms have sprouted up that keep Wells Fargo in check. Nearly 2,500 companies are now certified B-Corps. (Elkington, 2018) But his work does not come strictly from a place of academia. In cases that see private firms working with public bodies like the United Nations, companies were seen to not have to make much of a financial shift to receive both the benefits of better imaging in the public eye but also an improvement on the environment through their efforts. (Cetindamar, Dilek, and Kristoffer Husoy, 2007) Companies that work extensively with forests have also been found in a positive light. Those companies that take the initiative to increase their CSR measures with stakeholders ranging from locals to employees to NGOs find their performance goes up alongside their social investment. (Tuppura, A., A. Toppinen, and A. Jantunen, 2013)

Environment, as a term, and what a company scope of domain might be, are seemingly contested. In some contexts, “environment” is noted by corporate executives to mean whatever the locality or community they are in, extending the notion to perceptions and ideologies. (Yunis, Jamali, and Hashim, 2018) Actual numbers on the board, moving of the needle on a metric, are not evaluated by academic sources just yet as the research has been internal gazing, say “does hiring of female executives change company focus?” (Zou, Wu, Zhu, & Yang) and “do corporations act without a mandate to do so?” (Dahlsrud) Yes, and yes, but there is a dearth of
direct qualitative research on environmental impact by corporations that does not come from an internal reporting service of the company itself.

There has been research to demonstrate the bottom line increase in committing to a CSR plan; this has been demonstrated through: Centrality, Specificity, Proactivity, Voluntarism, Visibility. One research project lays out a framework for conducting CSR practices which promotes value creation: “identifiable, measurable economic benefits that the firms can expect to receive,” through the five dimensions above created by Burke and Logsdon in their 1996 research (497). This application to the environment is coming about in real time: According to Forbes (Dans, 2018) “California governor Jerry Brown, who I mentioned recently in regard to his decision to require 100% of the energy generated and consumed in the Sunshine State to be clean by 2045, has also signed an executive order requiring state agencies to work out how to make the entire economy carbon neutral within the same period. The order requires “net negative emissions” beyond 2045, which means using plants or technology to draw carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, and reuse or store it.” This piece goes on to explain how Lyft is buying “carbon credits,” how UPS and IKEA are converting to electric vehicles, and mentions C40 as a model for integrative tactics with cities.

We can understand the broader implications: corporations can find ways to act out of their own interests to create and protect their own capital interests as a way to show socially invested, for example. What I see internally might be extrapolated to companies with strong environmental interests: with CSR as a trust-building lens, by investing in their own assets (employees, trust with investors, and stockholders) companies actually see a better bottom line.

Coffee economics & models
The contemporary world of coffee, sustainability, economics and various models of production are a natural follow-up to CSR techniques. Many companies would like to think that their CSR models are doing the work of proper redistribution and economics, but, as I have found in these sources already, that does not end up being the case.

One of the first places to see the overlap is in the research of Christopher Bacon in “Confronting the Coffee Crisis: Can Fair Trade, Organic, and Specialty Coffees Reduce Small-Scale Farmer Vulnerability in Northern Nicaragua?” as he attempts to demonstrate the tangible gains coffee farmers make by participating in Fair Trade systems. He goes further in another piece: in his next paper published three years later he determines that out of 177 surveyed Nicaraguan households selling into Fair Trade markets in 2006, many that worked with cooperatives experienced positive impacts in education, infrastructure investment, and monetary savings. Low incomes, high emigration, and food insecurity remained, however — a key moment in understanding interpolation and narration’s falsehoods. This study showed selling into Fair Trade markets saw 97 percent of their children going to primary school, whereas only 74 percent of non-cooperative participating households did. (265) Environmentally speaking, “Shade coffee landscapes are important for their ability to conserve biodiversity, mitigate some effects of climate change, produce clean water, and reduce soil erosion.” (266) The study found 43% of Fair Trade selling households had “implemented soil and water conservation practices, compared to only 10% of the non-Fair Trade households.” It’s important to remember that the sustainable coffee market and the organic coffee market have experienced the most rapid growth: its market has doubled every five to six years. (Calo and Wise 2005, 4)

To showcase the divisive nature of this field immediately, however, one need only look at Candice Madison and Vava Angwenyi of Royal Coffee Roasters as they discuss the colonial
nature of these very same structures. (“Race and Specialty Coffee: Images are Everything”, 2020) Understanding Fair Trade is complicated, however, and worth further explanation. There are plenty of critiques of big Fair Trade campaigns incorporated by multinational corporations that serve only to make the company look good without moving the needle for poor and landless people. (Sylla, N., & Leye, D. 2014)

Dragusanu and other’s work in “The Journal of Economic Perspectives” examines the Fair Trade movement, its history, and its tangible impact. It cites flaws that have been widely agreed upon (i.e. that it has not solved any of its proposed problems since the inception in 1988) and it cites successes, as well. One that is applicable is in environmental protections: “Certain harmful chemicals are prohibited for Fair Trade production. The environmental criteria are meant to ensure that the members work towards good environmental practices as an integral part of farm management by minimizing or eliminating the use of less-desirable agrochemicals and replacing them, where possible, with natural biological methods, as well as adopting practices that ensure the health and safety of farm families, workers, and the community. Producers must provide basic environmental reports summarizing their impacts on the environment. The production of genetically modified crops by farmers is not allowed. (In practice, this is only relevant for a few crops for which genetically modified varieties are available to these farmers, namely cotton and rice.)” (Dragusanu, Giovannucci, and Nunn, p. 221)

The field focuses on sustainability as a major focus, of course. There is research that looks at the financial realities for farmers, as well, though. An industry-focused piece on alternative economic models and agroecological practices in Peru is one such example. This project, and those like it, give credibility and important context to arguments made in favor of such programs in comparison to dominant models. Cooperatives are not much situated in the
imaginary, and understanding what kinds of stories need to be told through this case study will be important. In the spirit of who is centered and who is not, this paper will add the idea that talking about rural people from the perspective of rural people is crucial. How sustainability looks to folks actually farming coffee in contrast to consumers of coffee in mostly global north countries is important, as well. (Enelow, 2012)

Another space in the conversation is describing how these small businesses and farmers are stewarding environmental conservation in their home countries, and how they are defending against natural disasters. This would be a small-scale example of CSR, but that makes it no less significant to the conversation around sustainability in the coffee industry specifically, highlighting the transitory nature of these pieces into each other’s realms. In El Salvador this looks like increasing shade grown biodiversity on farms to reflect that of natural parks. “Small-scale traditional coffee farms have higher conservation potential than do larger-scale agrochemical dependent types of coffee management. The data presented in the empirical studies in this book strongly support this argument.” (Bacon, Mendez, and Fox, p. 338, 2008)

The contemporary research also shows unique intersections of livelihoods and coffee. Work by Joseph Nevins shows the reality of migrating across the border due to the economic history imposed on our neighboring countries to the south. This is a keystone piece in showing the direct relationship between sanctions and imperial power based on global market pursuits and how that affected real people in those areas. In this case, the tensions and necessity around the coffee market become clear: many work the crop because there is no other choice. This helps contextualize coffee as a crop and piece of the global market system rather than as an interesting hobby or beverage for Americans, focusing explicitly on the results and impacts on international trade agreements like the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) of the 1960s. (Nevins, 2007)
There are less common approaches to this work, as well. Alternative economic models include solidarity economies, cooperatives, and even economies of communion like the Focolare movement. (Gold, 2010) Through a faith-based lens, the Focolare movement (born in Italy, now popular all over the world and especially in Brazil) shows what it looks like to live with poverty as the center of a global market system. The thousands of business owners who participate don’t pretend to not be invested in perpetuating the business — they just make sure their profits go, at a huge rate, back to the community and in donations to their “neighbors.” This is mostly a relevant text in showcasing other forms of organizing capital and markets that already have lots of participants.

Historical examples are important to note. Susanna Moore provides context on the indigenous peoples of Hawai’i and how the Dutch and, later, American empires demolished their world. This is purely an important case study in the world of counter-narration as it relates to economic livelihood: the rate at which Hawaiians were worked directly correlated to their ability to represent themselves to their overlords and the wider world. This is a truth today, as well. Hawai’i represents one of the only domestic, if you can count the occupied queendom as U.S. soil, coffee markets that the states can produce, to boot. One possible way to leverage this case study properly is in examining Native Hawaiians who own coffee companies or the stories told through those businesses.

In another more contemporary economic framing, Tsing’s work on mushroom supply chains is an important addition. Monocropping, agroforestry, and water access is central to understanding coffee labor and outputs. Her work is useful in framing what a revolutionary supply chain can look like. Additionally, her definitions of salvage accumulation and “patches” as a framework for understanding radical economic spaces are useful. (Tsing, 2017) The world
of contemporary economic framings is rich; Jacqueline Novogratz makes an interesting companion piece to Tsing. Her book is mostly biographical memoir, but as her firm Acumen has such weight in the world of microfinance the chapters wherein the author talks about economics are helpful in understanding where the contemporary conversation is today. One such excerpt is Azahar Coffee and ethical contracting with farmers, patient investing, and equitable pay. (157 - 160) “Companies and investors tend to allocate financial and human resources to achieve the highest possible financial returns, and even some impact investors count it as a bonus rather than a requirement when social impact is also achieved. The expense of corporate resources on fairly integrating smallholder farmers into the supply chain, training women and minorities, and protecting and strengthening the environment tends to be relegated to Corporate Social Responsibility or philanthropy. Yet, only when companies regularly quantify and value nonpecuniary but fundamental human and environmental benefits will we see a more inclusive, sustainable market system.” (162)

Before transitioning to the third area of literature, it is worth looking at pieces that serve as natural bridges between these circles of focus. Melissa Dell’s award-winning work in modern Javanese economic communities, with contributions from Benjamin Olken, is one such liminal piece. Her work is relevant in a myriad of ways: understanding postcolonial economics in its starkest reality. The piece, then, motions toward interesting futures based on these colonial histories. The first being that those descendants of the colonial system are actually seeing better economic realities than those who were not working in sugar factories, for example. What does this mean for storytelling? For understanding how farmers might interact with the global market? These findings are contemporary, critical understandings, using econometrics, of how to think
about business owners and farmers (not flattened “poor” people or even the more historical framing of “peasant”) selling their goods, and why.

What we then see in this space of conversation is, as stated briefly, a big focus on a few angles of the conversation: sustainability of the industry and livelihood of the farmers. There are more radical spaces in the field, as noted toward the end of this section, but ultimately the vast majority of the writing is being done about a few spaces. This leaves a greatly unheard interjection to be had about how postcolonial narration would intersect with these realities.

*Postcolonial theory & narration*

This portion of the literature review is far less contemporary, but theoretical. It is more about framing techniques and thought leaders who have made long term contributions to this field. While these contributions are not always modern they are quite important in understanding how we see interpolation, own-voice, storytelling and counter-narration as it relates to economics, coffee, and CSR.

Schumacher’s seminal piece, “Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered,” takes work and life for farmers in coffee producing communities to the forefront. Famous for his proposal of Buddhist Economics, especially as a contradiction to his contemporary Milton Friedman, it is important to understand counter-narration even within the academy. As Friedman’s ideals became dominant and the skeleton to the neoliberal world we inherited, it is crucial to recognize Schumacher as another European intellectual white man whose ideas actually support peasant livelihoods. In understanding political economy and methodologies to participate, the slowness and intentionality behind Schumacher will help create some foundation to the argument steeped in proper theory.
Howard Zinn cannot be ignored when thinking about the modern thinkers in counter-narration as it relates to concrete treatment by powers that be. The seminal text “A People’s History of the United States” is in anarchist bookstores across the world for good reason. Zinn positions most race and gender-based policy made by the British and later American empires through economic reasoning. By investigating capitalism and its inevitable displacement of poor people, Zinn shows that the trajectory of the United States has always necessarily shoved Black and Brown people to the sides, into cages. This school of thought has been featured lately by Ibram Kendi (“Stamped from the Beginning”) and Isabel Wilkerson (“Caste”) to much acclaim in the last few years of public police executions and the subsequent protesting. David Stovall and Derrick Bell, an educator and a lawyer respectively who have each contributed significantly to the field of Critical Race Theory, are important additions to the power of counter-narration in the face of oppressive regimes, as well.

Paulo Freire is an important inclusion in the idea of counter-narration, specifically, as stated in the abstract. Freire’s concepts around “co-investigators” working together to achieve true victory (raising consciousness and becoming more human, according to Freire: liberation) is a big contribution to this world, being cited by numerous researchers for the decades to follow including Noam Chomsky. (Freire, 2018)

To go further into the world of theory, Said’s writings are indeed paramount. The Palestinian American explored questions like ‘How do we allow displaced and marginalized people to speak about themselves in public?’ and ‘Through what mediums?’ His piece “Permission to Narrate” fully makes the connection from theory to economics while interrogating what it means to use that narration as a tool for economic opportunity. As he recounts Chomsky’s write-up of the bombings in Lebanon, Said further asks ‘Who are the
 storytellers and who is simply interpolating and co-opting?’ This text is important to the literature in fleshing out the sinewy connections of these seemingly disparate schools of thought. Like Said, Achille Mbembe is an important postcolonial thought leader on why narration is important to the consumer imagination. His work could be seen as less applicable than Said and others, but it will still be important for a full approach to counter-narration’s intersection with economics. Mbembe writes about opportunity and livelihood, for example, as it pertains to the ways one is viewed by their society. (Mbembe, 2017)

Sedgewick’s 2020 book “Coffeeland: One Man’s Dark Empire and the Making of Our Favorite Drug” is another important contribution to this field, though another white academic. Sedgewick has taken the gauntlet from writers like Schumacher, Tsing, and Said to bring this information to the masses: his book was published by Penguin Press and received reviews in outlets such as The Atlantic. The book is, however, importantly framed as a thorough investigation of the economic impetus that lay in destroying the stability of El Salvador to generate massive coffee exports by a British expat. Sedgewick even describes ways in which companies like Hills Brothers portrayed coffee farmers in movies and marketing materials back in San Francisco while folks continued to toil in El Salvador. Clearly an important piece in understanding how this world is shaping up in 2022.

The logical conclusion to draw from the theoretical standpoint, then, is a crux of research that can be centered upon own-voice and counter-narration as it implicates economic and political opportunity. The popular movements that have evolved to better sustain farmers have not succeeded in our two fold issue: decreasing stigmatization of farmers or increasing livelihoods of those same farmers. Fair Trade is a most-cited effort that became mainstream in the 1980s through the efforts of a Mennonite pursuing ethical capitalism for Central American
coffee farmers. While well-intentioned, the numbers are again plain: fair trade farmers see about one-tenth of the profits from retail sales of their coffee. Moreover, the issue seems to be that multinational corporations look like philanthropists and get away with the ongoing abuses. (Sylla, N., & Leye, D. 2014)

The case study: Capeltic and Yomol A’tel

Coffee means different things to different people. It can be the utilitarian source of enhanced productivity, the social lubricant that brings people together, or a rewarding treat with leisure. For many who produce coffee, it is the source of livelihood, but also one's biggest fear. The coffee tree is prone to supply-side shocks that introduce a significant source of uncertainty for growers’ incomes. Coffea arabica, the plant that produces the world’s most commonly-consumed type of coffee beans, is a delicate plant that is prone to multiple production risks. It can only grow in mountainous regions across the equator, due to its requirement of a minimum of 50 inches of rain, and a temperature range of a high of 77 degrees Fahrenheit, and a low of 59 degrees (Thurston, 2013).

In November of 2021, Vox Media released an in-depth, multimedia article about the impending “Coffee’s Crisis.” The author detailed the history of the industry, the difficulties of farming the world’s favorite stimulant, and possible solutions. The takeaway? Stenophylla, a varietal of the coffee plant, can withstand 10 degrees hotter temperatures than the two most popular varietals, arabica and robusta, at around 77 degrees Fahrenheit. At even a pop culture, newspaper level, one thing is becoming well understood: coffee, as it has been produced, cannot last.
What will become of those who rely on the crop for their income? Around the world millions of people rely on the global specialty coffee industry, coffee that is considered higher quality than commodity grade. The specialty market alone was worth $35 million as an industry in 2018, a figure that is expected to grow to $83 million by 2025. (Ruskey) All of these people need to keep working — as Tsing writes, “We are stuck with the problem of living despite economic and ecological ruination.” (Tsing, 19)

Enter, then, Yomol A’tel. The cooperative is described in its operations well by its own graphic. Chilón, a town and municipal area where the cooperative is located, hosts about 111,500 residents. It’s about five hours from the next nearest city, Tuxtla, by car, which requires navigating corrupt police officers with assault rifles and angry bands of locals who hold up inbound and outbound vehicles for petty cash along the road — not unlike the police’s behavior. Capeltic in Tzeltal means “our coffee.” But “our,” in English and in Spanish, is only one form of saying it — us. But in Tzeltal there are two ways. One “us” is about including all the people, the people that are saying the sentence and the other one in front of me. And, the second style of us is us but excluding, separating, the third person. Then our café, Capeltic, means “us” including all. There is certainly a radical approach to communalism inside the cooperative’s organizing documents, and its practices really do follow suit.

Chiapas is the Southernmost state of Mexico’s 32 states. It’s full of hills and mountains, unnamed to many of the Indigenous folks but are pieces of what the Mexican government calls the Sierra Madre de Chiapas which ranges through 1,206 named mountains, accompanied by great ravines and rivers. It’s like Mexico’s Middle Earth. Communities, the regionally-appropriate term that may translate to Global North imaginations of “villages,” rely on these bountiful natural areas. Growing their own food is the norm; growing something additional to
sell for money is also expected. The coffee drunk after waking up, prepared in big pots over open flames, is grown in folks’ backyards, for instance.

The cooperative’s website lists 61 workers throughout their network and 344 indigenous families who produce for them, as well, though the numbers fluctuate. (Carlos) The cooperative’s five businesses or sub-cooperatives are

- Ts’umbal Xitalha, a coffee worker’s rights group
- Bats’il Maya, the coffee production group
- Capeltic, the coffee sales group that runs Nuestro Cafe
- Xapontic, a homegoods and soap production and sales group
- Chabtic, a honey production and sales group

The cooperative trains, through various schools in each group, Indigenous workers to take on management or oversight roles that they can take back as skills to their communities. The workers are optimistic, on the whole, though there is infighting within the ranks as those at the producer level still face daily poverty. “I believe that we have to have hope for the workers,” Victor Lopez Jimenez, a worker in the honey arm Chabtic said. “To have a higher price for what we produce. We have to keep looking for what we want. This is it. The investments for their families, to have better work in coffee and better production also — better sales.”

There are threats to the cooperative from all sides. Coyotes, for instance, are not just animals in the Selva de Norte or Northern Jungle. It’s a term that, locally, refers to independent buyers and sellers of commodity goods. That includes coffee. Locals are able to get better prices since coyotes are often selling to the big buyers. The stories and narratives surrounding this phenomenon are counter-narratives in their own right. “Sometimes the coyote buys at a high price, and we can’t compete with that,” Lopez Jimenez said. “The workers get upset because,
even for organic, we aren’t getting a good price [with the cooperative].” Consumers certainly do
tend to believe that buying organic or Fair Trade is solving the problem for producers, and,
additionally, this points to the ongoing narrative power issues.

Cooperative members also face a complicated task — just because they encourage the
farming-members of the cooperative to use modern practices and organic techniques doesn’t
mean the members of the cooperative will listen to them. They are, mostly, at an advantage since
many themselves are Indigenous, but learning new tricks is hard for any old dog. “It’s difficult to
talk about agroecology. It’s hard to convince them not to use any chemicals…because it’s a lot
of manual, hard work,” Lopez Jimenez said. “The price of coffee and honey is so low that it isn’t
worth all the work that they do.”

Lopez Jimenez wrings his hands as community members nap and scowl during regional
meetings called asambleas. He is explaining to cooperative members the advantages of
diversifying the flowers in their agricultural fields. He is telling them the bees like the variety.
“We want better production to have more hives,” Lopez Jimenez said. One by one members of
the community walked out of the small wooden church, ignoring his calls to action. Afternoon
sun shone off of the coffee plants lining the road, enormous turkeys walking between the shrubs.
Only 44 percent of the cooperative’s members came to their meetings this year.

But Lopez Jimenez maintains optimism. The Jesuit mission in the city works closely with
Yomol A’tel to increase their customer base. Eduardo “Lalo” Hernandez, a thoughtful and
traveled member of the cooperative, handles social media. He’s shown loads of the members
what is possible for Yomol A’tel. The producers get giddy at the thought.

Coffee sales accounted for just 46 percent of income last year, a great drop in comparison
to past years’ returns. Chiapas is one of the worlds’ best specialty coffee regions. Rodriguez is
wise to be hopeful — people will keep drinking coffee. But how the farmers can create revenue streams that materially upgrade their lives is a whole other wish.

**Figure A**

The history of the cooperative can be shared briefly. Oscar, a Jesuit priest who helped found the organization, says the indigenous people have been suffering for 500 years from “structural injustice.” Chiapas is the first coffee region in Mexico and 70 percent grown by indigenous peoples. Alberto Irezabal Vilaclara is the former director of the cooperative, who now teaches at the Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de Mexico, and speaks often to academics and various bourgeoisie about incorporating the value chain for farmers to receive more of their own money, which the cooperative does well by roasting and selling the transformed coffee drinks themselves.
Their own work in supporting disparate narratives in the industry, those of their own producers, is inspiring. The documentary movie “A Six Dollar Cup of Coffee” was a perfect platform for their farmers to represent themselves to their global north coffee consuming customers. No one even speaks English until about a half hour into the movie, instead speaking in Tseltal or Spanish. 24-year-old Ceasar spreads knowledge of coffee to the “other regions,” the areas described above where coffee growing actually takes place, so they can demand better prices for their coffee. “To realize that a good cup of coffee can be worth a lot.” In the movie, a coffee “expert” tells the farmers at a Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) convention that their alternative economic model is not scalable, an interesting moment of dominant narrative in the otherwise pro-counter narrative film. Andi Mersch, the Vice President of Coffee and Sustainability at Philz Coffee, adds an interview in the movie to say the best things farmers can do is own their own sales. (Diaz)

The cooperative does a terrific job of finding outlets of all kinds, such as this film, to share their story. Irezabal Vilaclara co-authored a research paper in 2020 about solidarity economics called “Avoiding failure in the face of crisis: The cases of two indigenous and rural organizations that are a part of the social and solidarity economy in Oaxaca and Chiapas” that spoke to the struggles of Capeltic. In Jesuit periodical “aurora’s” January 2021 issue, the cooperative found a chance to highlight their work; one of the Tseltal farmers Claudia Ruiz (who worked as one of my three translators while I was in Chilón) wrote a six page paper under the section “Redes de Colaboracion en la Economia Alternative y Solidaria.” Her writing eloquently captured the nuances of Yomol A’tel’s work and vision, while including photos and testimonies from farmers and producers.
Most recently, and most significantly, comes the compendium “Voces de Yomol A’tel” published by Universidad Iberoamericana authored by Enrique Pieck Gochicoa, artha Roxana Vicente Diaz, and “Comunidad de Yomol A’tel” broadly. It is a 547 page text with more than 40 extensive interviews with producers, many of whom I covered in my own research in much greater detail, with appendices for strategies and tactics of the Yomol A’tel cooperative. The cover is illustrated by members of the cooperative, and is a much more substantial version of the original outline of my own research project — imagine my surprise when encountering this book, published in the summer my own research was being pursued!

**Figure B**

![Voces de Yomol A'tel Cover](image)

**Process**
I was asked to conduct my research in Chilón in August of 2021 because of the regional assembleas, quarterly meetings where officials from Yomol A’tel meet with workers of the eleven areas that produce coffee, honey, etc. for the cooperative.

The goal from the moment my interviews began was to avoid repeating what the cooperative had done in the past, and to capture new trends and conversations emerging from members and staff. I hoped to find productive, innovative avenues for the farmers to access political economic power. This worked well as the hope was to look at CSR possibilities for other coffee collectives, and the power of representation in conducting these tactics. The hope was, as well, to create materials that the cooperative could use for their own advertising and marketing in the future. The cooperative officials let me know that their hope was to grow sales in the United States and broadly.

Data and findings

The predominant findings were surprising, and are understood only in comparison to the description of Yomol A’tel’s approach to sharing their story. Through our understanding of narrative power, their strategy should produce equitable pay to their members, high returns from global north buyers, and an optimistic growth pattern. From my understanding of their pricing in the last few years, and what I observed, the scenario seems to be the opposite.

Through the more than 22 private and group interviews I was able to conduct, eight of which were assembleas, I found my original hypothesis — that the farmers and officials at Yomol A’tel would be flourishing in comparison to other cooperatives who do not even venture into storytelling — was on its head. Not only were prices low and farmers upset, prices were
lower and farmers were more upset than I could have predicted, or would, theoretically, make sense for such a radical group.

The cooperative offers tiered pricing for farmers to incentivize better gourmet quality coffee. Oro coffee (higher quality) prices and pergamino (lower quality) prices are higher and lower respectively, and organic oro and pergamino are higher versions of the same. Transicion is the name for coffee that involves organic practices, and has a better quality, but is not certified organic, and desmanche is the term for bottom tier coffee. For a snapshot, 2020 to 2021 prices had organic pergamino at 45 pesos per kilo, transicion pergamino at 35 pesos per kilogram, organic oro at 56 pesos per kilogram, and transicion oro at 43 pesos per kilogram. The cooperative’s prices can go higher, but it is quite rare. A microlot variety, for example a Gesha harvest, could fetch 405 pesos a kilo. To put it in perspective, a single one kilogram bag of gourmet Capeltic coffee can sell online, through Amazon for example, for about 245 pesos.

Coyotes’ prices are contestable, but on the whole are typically higher. Domingo, one of my translators and an Indigenous producer, told me that the price is anywhere from 400 to 560 pesos a kilo for pergamino. He also said that in the past the cooperative had been able to compete with or surpass coyote prices. Coyotes buy honey, as well, and their price is often better there, too. There are other financial perks to selling to the cooperative, though; members get a flat gift of 500 pesos each year for membership, and have access to microloans. Additionally the cooperative will finance a celebration, sick pay, a child’s education, or to make an investment in a parcel (organic certification, agroecological practices, etc).

Things do look grim: only 1978 kilograms of coffee was sold to Yomol A’tel in all of 2020 to 2021, and 73,918 kilograms went to coyotes in the same year.
Figure C.1

Precio del Café (pergamino)
Yomol A’tel vs Precio local (coyote)

El punteado es el precio promedio pagado (esto comercial con el pago de café en oro y por calidades)

Fecha


Coyote  Yomol A’tel  Primera  Segunda  Tercera  Promedio

Figure C.2

Precio del Café (Oro)
Yomol A’tel vs Precio local (coyote)

El punteado es el precio promedio pagado (esto comercial con el pago de café en oro y por calidades)

Fecha


Coyote  Yomol A’tel  Primera  Segunda  Tercera  Promedio
Finding ways to get information on how and why to farm agroecologically to the farmers was difficult. This makes sense, as “coffee is the third-most heavily sprayed crop in the world after cotton and tobacco (Pendergrast 1999:398). In addition to the heavy use of chemical inputs, numerous environmental problems are associated with coffee production, including the clearing of forest areas, soil degradation from chemical use, and degraded freshwater ecosystems as a result of dumping waste pulp (rather than using the pulp as a soil amendment, which is encouraged in organic and shade-grown coffee production).” (Lyon, 124)

All the producers and farmers drink coffee, but not in the transformed way global north drinkers would anticipate. Beans are grown in the yard at home, rather than on the farms where the work is done, then roasted in small roasting drums at their houses. Therefore my finding is that companies are indeed interested in a downward pressure to highlight certain farmer voices, racist and dominant, though, as evident from these stats and stories, life as a coffee producer is anything but a romanticized agrarian fantasy. We can see that, at times, even Yomol A’tel falls into this practice of narrative reduction to try and keep sales stable or growing.

**The counter-argument to counter-narration**

Before offering recommendations and insights, I’ll attempt to address what could be counter-arguments to the evidence provided from my Capeltic case study and framing choices. Remember that what follows is to further edify the belief that bastardizing farmer stories is not helpful to creating solutions to economic political shortcomings in the supply chain and buying system.

Chomsky wrote a book called “The Fateful Triangle” about the war in Lebanon and the damage being done. His work was called “idiotic” by Said who wishes that more Lebanese people had written about the conflict themselves, or that more of their journals could have been
recovered in the wreck. (Said 1980) Why is this significant? The counter-argument to the
proposition that interpolation is how we must view this flux of “storytelling” is the same that has
been devolved in pop culture of “representation.” It is important to have a diverse host in the
White House, for example, is a powerful dominant narrative for the Democratic Party in the U.S.
To Said’s claim, our issue ends up looking a lot like this — a member of the bourgeoisie elite
doing the intellectually lazy “work” of promoting rights for those they claim to be members of
their community, while ignoring the weak foundation of the system.

That is the most important point: the work done by those who would say any
representation is a net gain for members of marginalized communities need only look to the
numbers to see that the strategies employed by countries, intergovernmental agencies, and MNCs
simply are not increasing the livelihoods of those they claim to be supporting. So why would this
continue to be an argument? It remains a popular argument because it aesthetically pleases
consumers and citizens while protecting those who perpetuate the harm.

A historical example that pulls further the thread of the U.S. government is the response
to Goldschmit’s research in the 1940s. When the government attempted to promote a counter-
narration, a rarity, MNCs working in agribusiness were so distraught that they organized
ritualistic burnings of the findings. (Labao & Meyer, 2001) This is the power of promoting truth
over propaganda.

Another tact some would take is to say there are better ways to achieve the same goals.
To some, counter-narration and own-voice testimony are simply too fluffy, not hard and fast
enough. These same folks might say “Well, direct buying from cooperatives already exists!
What’s new about this proposal of storytelling?”
To illustrate the lack in this argument that there are better ways to achieve these same goals, it’s as easy as indicating the same logical fallacies that persist with any push-back on a suggestion of implementing a new system or structure. “Communism could never work on the same scale as capitalism. How do I know that? Well, it hasn’t.” Right, but it’s never been given the same political-economic legitimacy in the consumer imagination. This is referred to as a straw man argument — a fake rebuttal, not held up by anything but paper and string.

If we were to finance and commit with real resources to alternative economic models (own-voice narration, cooperative structures, take your pick) we would have to give these projects the same time, energy, and credence as we do, say, the United States dominant market system (destroy, pillage, expropriate, take your pick). In its roughly 40 years in existence, Fair Trade and “alternative trade organizations” are at an all time high selling to about five percent of the American consumer market. (Sedgewick, 2020. P. 357) Indeed, cooperatives and organic growing conditions do provide a better livelihood for farmers — in Oaxaca, Mexico it was shown to net growers a 40 percent price premium. (Batz, Albers, Ávalos-Sartorio, and Blackman, 2005) But, again, this is at just five percent of the market in the U.S. We have not committed to this idea fully, and it is a farce to point to these structures and say “Look! It’s already working,” as people die in an attempt to escape their ancestral homes.

Recommendations
This is what we do: ... this is what the tobacco leaf roller does: this is what the washer-woman & the laundry worker does: this is what the grape & artichoke worker does: ... notice how they bend in the fires no one sees ... underneath this colossal tree with its condor-wings shedding solace for a second or two notice: how they touch the earth — for you

From “Touch the earth (once again)” in Everyday We Get More Illegal by Juan Felipe Herrera

COVID-19’s impact at Yomol A’tel

Given the timing of the own-voice narrative materials provided by Yomol A’tel — many in 2019 and 2020 — it’s worth mentioning research that highlighted the strange findings dictated by the global pandemic.

Alex Rodriguez, one of two directors at Yomol A’tel, shared that most of the farmers in the hinterlands didn’t believe that COVID was a real determinant of pricing issues that the cooperative faced. Rodriguez, for his part, said that it was far and away the biggest indicator of price disparity in recent months. Capeltic, sometimes known by the name of its service Nuestro Cafe and the service arm of the cooperative’s approach to alternative economic sustainability, was completely shutdown throughout Mexico when the pandemic landed. “Our coffee wasn’t bought,” Rodriguez shared. His insight highlights the need for price floors and safety nets from historic buyers who have additional capital, which reflects historical issues of coffee purchasing sustainability — there is no insurance for producers, and with a bad market — such as the disintegration of the 1986 International Coffee Agreement — their lives suffer alongside the price drop.
Rodriguez highlighted what came up in interviews, as well: Mexicans bought local “medicine” as the impression, in his words, was that the government healthcare couldn’t protect citizens. Hence the cooperative saw a stark rise in honey sales. This project comes at a unique time in learning how a pandemic can make these impacts, then.

Migratory patterns and climate refugees

In recent decades, the average global temperature has steadily risen, which has not only reduced the suitability for flourishing coffee production, but these increased temperatures also leave arabica varietals more vulnerable to disease and pests. Coffee leaf rust, or as it is known in Latin America, la roya, is one of coffee’s biggest threats. It is a fungus that feeds on coffee leaves, and prohibits the tree’s capacity to photosynthesis, and completely kills off any cherry production from that tree for the entire year. La roya is highly contagious, and thus once it has been introduced to a farm, it could spread throughout the entire farm and destroy production. Colombia experienced an outbreak in 2008 to 2011, where production fell by over 30 percent (Avelino, 2015). The increase in temperatures has also increased the range of coffee farms that are vulnerable to a pest called the Coffee Borer Beetle, which hollows out coffee cherries and destroys the fruit production (Jaramillo, 2011).

Alexander Betts wrote “Survival migrants can be defined as ‘persons who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution.’” (Betts, 23) He writes this definition because, in his mind, the focus of refugee status today needs to be on rights in an area, not the movement itself. (Betts, 17) The history of refugee definitions needs not to be expunged here, but it is a long and sad miasma of misclassifications — a healthy consensus agrees that the definition for a refugee, as posited by
the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is too limited and Eurocentrically defined. Survival migration, as a concept, has evolved from the need for more inclusive terminology and as the conversation around internally displaced persons (IDPs) is often too limited, as well. Coffee farmers, global producers of many ilks, are ripe for inclusion.

Chimni adds to this discourse by reminding readers that the “positivist tradition” in the migration field “limits the possibility of engagement with politics.” The author goes on to say this is a convenient choice for those in the academy and at the UNHCR as they opt for “the neutral language of humanitarianism.” (Chimni, 352-353) It’s too easy to assume that this history of conventions and classifications is without scrutiny from the UNHCR itself; it’s just better for the UNHCR if the definitions remain the way they are, Chimni claims.

It bears repeating that the neutral language Chimni speaks of has very real impacts in the coffee industry, as well. Companies do everything they can to present a homogenized, easy-going image of what a coffee farmer is — think Juan Valdez in Colombia. This is followed up by Fair Trade organizations and other NGOs claiming that by simply buying better coffee you will make their lives better. Some matter of this is true: Bacon, C.M., V.E. Mendez, Gomez, Maria Eugenia Flores, Stuart, Douglas and Flores, Sandro Raul Diaz did that work looking at Nicaraguan Fair Trade markets in 2006, and the material benefits balanced against longtime ongoing plight. (Bacon et al, 265)

The important allegory is to connect the migrant regime to the coffee regime. Helping refugees, in any way, is de facto helpful; buying better coffee supports a better specialty coffee market. Neither of these actions address root problems, though, and that is what we are concerned with today: survival migration is already here, and will continue to rise if not addressed. Failed and fragile states are the most likely to see their population move elsewhere,
and the history of this outflow in the Chiapas area will be touched upon later. Betts recognizes further that the concept of a “survival migrant” can jeopardize the rights given to refugees, a critique made by Hathaway. (Betts, 21) It’s crucial to understand for our sake that survival migrant allows for better protection for those in Chiapas, and those who have already left. In Veracruz, another major coffee-producing area, some researchers have estimated some 70 percent of the area’s residents have left for the United States as they look down the future in this industry. While that seems high, Nevins writes “A spokesperson with the Veracruz Coffee Council estimated in 2002 that between 30 and 35 percent of the state’s coffee workers had migrated in the wake of the crisis.” (Nevins, 237)

As it is for all of Mexico it is for Chiapas; the relationship between the coffee crisis and outbound migration is there. Quantitative analysis and household surveys show that between 1999 and 2004 the coffee crisis was an important factor in the increase in migration from the area.” (Nevins, 237)

To Standart magazine, journalist Elisa Suárez wrote it succinctly:

A study by the Climate Institute has estimated that by 2050, the global area suitable for growing coffee is likely to be reduced by 50 per cent.

Approximately 35 percent of Mexican coffee is cultivated over 900 metres above sea level, but changing climactic conditions are already pushing production to higher altitudes. Thousands of small producers are facing the possibility of losing entirely the ability to cultivate high-quality, shade-grown arabica coffee, and the necessary expansion of sun-grown coffee varieties is
generating additional risks that affect 'cloud forest' ecosystems, which are extremely important reservoirs of biodiversity. Changing climactic conditions will heighten the risks already faced by farmers, while negatively affecting their capacity to produce high-quality coffee. (Suarez, 16-23)

If we are considering these issues to be legitimate issues, such as the dire report given by Vox to millions of coffee drinkers, then we don’t need to spend much time proving Chiapas farmers to be in crisis. On a theoretical level it is defensible when thinking about Hyndman’s “preventative protection,” which is a concept that intersects with economic policy and international trade. (Hyndman, 17)

What does a country without preventative protection look like? Coffee prices were at a relative high in 1986 — overproduction was a problem, with many countries destroying excess coffee as it flooded the market. According to WOLA, that was the same year that the U.S. — Mexico Border saw over 1,600,000 “migrant encounters,” an enormous spike that has only been matched two other times in history. In 1989 the International Coffee Agreement fell apart, a policy no more. (Isacson) As researcher Joseph Nevins points out, due to the messy nature of migration, it can be hard to know how much of that influx is a result of Chiapas outflow specifically. But the farmers in the Chiapas region in the late 1980s and 1990s could have received tangible investment and opportunity construction in that area rather than detention zones, constructed in response to what has been called the Refugee Crisis that lasted from 1974 to 1996 in the Americas. (Garcia, 30) Instead they were forced to rely on one of the only crops
that grows in their mountainous homeland that can be sold for a return on the international market: coffee.

On the technical level, though, it is an imperative portion of the argument: do Chiapas farmers face a crisis? A better way to frame the question might be: are rivers of migration related to the state of the coffee industry? As Suarez points out, the crop itself is dying. Frandsen and Von Braun look at the “twin objectives” of short-term needs of farmers and the long-term impossibility of the coffee industry as it stands today. Environmentally, their research contends, coffee cannot last at its current trajectory. In the background history, it examines the lack of price regulation as a neoliberal tool that is “good business for their politically powerful transnational companies.” (208) The stenophylla plant, mentioned as a beacon of hope by Vox and its quoted academics, is just beginning to be researched and almost an anomaly. Dell’s research in the mitas of Chile points out the obvious, as well: even if stenophylla can be mass farmed, how will it reach the entirely rural and mostly Indigenous farmers of Chiapas? Roads are not built, Mayan languages are barely spoken and certainly not by staff of multinational corporations who buy the coffee, and supply chains don’t flow backwards. Between Vox, Standart, and academics, the consensus is clear.

This field is well established, which is important in substantiating my claim: in many ways, I am not the first to do so, though perhaps to be so explicit and bold in my connecting the dots. Chimni is significant in this discourse again when the researcher points out that within migration there is a need to interrogate capital and political influence in displacement. The example the author chooses to illustrate this point? The Rwandan Genocide of 1994. The West, he argues, wants to see this complex history as “an open and shut case of ethnic conflict” whereas it was directly related to the coffee market collapse and “the sweeping macro-economic
reforms by the Bretton Woods institutions,” which were popular structural adjustment programs (SAPs) at the time. This narrative cannot stand, Chimni argues, as it would lead to the “idea of global distributive justice.” (Chimni, 361 — 362)

The United States is well aware of these issues at the Mexico and Guatemala border, but they must be subpoenaed to be honest about their practices. Nevins reminds readers that the Clinton Administration recognized its own neoliberal project to gain access to Mexican markets would further shake migration through the country. “As Doris Meissner, who was commissioner of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service at the time, admitted during testimony to the US Congress in November 1993, she foresaw that NAFTA would most likely lead to an increase in unauthorised immigration from Mexico to the United States in the short and medium terms.” (Nevins, 240) The research by Fitzgerald adds to this discourse the significance of “securitization.” Many scholars and policymakers emphasize “interpreting reality and creating policy through the master frame of protecting against violent threats to the state” which adds further to the impossibility of prioritizing human lives over the flow of capital. (Fitzgerald, 41)

Valeria Luiselli, on Democracy Now, claimed that eight of 10 girls and women who travel from Central America through the elongated border that is Mexico to the United States are raped — many begin taking contraceptives before beginning their travel, knowing the odds are that they will be assaulted. Coffee farming, and the future that is quickly devouring the communities that grow and harvest the bean, is a living hell.

Looking at how businesses can chip in, some researchers take an “EPR” lens, the “extended producer responsibility system” that can be created for those who are impacting the environment. The paper finds, with China as a primary case study, that government incentives can help create ecological sustainability inside of companies. They argue that consumer demand
cannot ultimately pressure enough to make the changes required for proper stewardship. (Dong & Zhang)

To understand why such a bold claim can be made, one needs to understand the reality of commodity export for exporting communities and nations. To capture the gravity, think of how the crop itself is extracted and how that may create conditions one would need to “survive.” Tsing explains her term “salvage accumulation” as “the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced.” (Tsing, 63) The means of acquiring these spaces to harvest capital is historically “procured through violence: classic salvage” according to the researcher. All of the world’s most powerful coffee companies, multinational corporations like Starbucks and Nestle, are owned and operated by European and Northern countries like Sweden, France, and the United States. All of their power was gained through murder and enslavement, all of it built off the backs of Black and Brown bodies.

Dell’s intelligent use of econometrics in Chile showcased the way that mining on the mitas created ramifications for generations of Chileans, and bolsters the argument that invasion of commodity-rich lands has resulted in disproportionate impact on the peoples in that area. Dell recognizes “institutional structures largely in place before the formation of the landed elite did not provide secure property rights, protection from exploitation, or a host of other guarantees to potential smallholders.” (Dell, 1866) She goes further to examine why these issues persist: “Tactics such as the *interdicto de adquirir*, a judicial procedure which allowed aspiring landowners to legally claim “abandoned” lands that in reality belonged to peasants. *Hacienda* expansion also occurred through violence, with cattle rustling, grazing estate cattle on peas- ant lands, looting, and physical abuse used as strategies to intimidate peasants into
signing bills of sale.” (1890) Living as a working class Chilean in this time was hellish, and even violences as nuanced as infrastructure plague coffee-growing communities today.

One may argue that these examples do not apply to coffee. One would be wrong. Sedgewick finds that in El Salvador the colonial practices of James Hill were part and parcel of the country’s infamous destabilization. The wealthy European businessman destroyed crops and accumulated food like tortillas and beans so Salvadorans were forced to work for him to find anything to eat. (Sedgewick, 140-142) Brazil was not much better — it was the last Western country to permit slavery, using millions of workers to get the coffee industry started. Sedgewick writes:

The problems of the Brazilian coffee planters showed up as hope in the world’s other coffee districts. The example of Haiti, where coffee had collapsed after the abolition of slavery and the overthrow of the French colonial government at the turn of the nineteenth century, was not so remote. The rise of coffee in wider Latin America — not only in El Salvador but in neighboring and nearby countries too, Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, and Guatemala, where the liberal government instituted a forced draft of Indian labor in 1877 — marked a contrapuntal rhythm to the fall of slavery in Brazil.20 And for four or five years after abolition, this hope must have seemed well founded, as coffee production in the state of Rio declined by 50 percent.21 (Sedgewick, 52)

To update Sedgewick’s history, Nevins found still today that in “El Salvador…45 percent of children in coffee-growing areas are malnourished.” (238) For farmers in Chiapas, a state that
was in the middle of the refugee outflow from Guatemala in the aforementioned crisis, a protracted one at that, coffee farming never felt like a choice. It’s a meager way to survive.

Living as an Indigenous member of any of the regions in the world that produce the bean, known familiarly as “The Coffee Belt,” has been, historically, a death sentence. What could make it worse? How about rising temperatures and sea levels? In his extensive book on Nigerian petroleum markets, the 23rd chapter begins with a declaration that gas and oil companies have a “responsibility” to restore the degradation to the environment that is a result of their activities. (Usman, 357)

To help paint the picture of the impending crisis that Capeltic producers, and coffee producers everywhere, face, think of Hawai‘i. The island queendom is popular for its coffee because of the island nation’s volcanic soil, a mineral rich land that produces acidic coffee. Unfortunately the days of romanticizing the world’s heat and brimstone is long gone; it is a terrifying time to be alive, and much scarier if your world revolves around plants and producing them. Tsing adds “imagining the human since the rise of capitalism entangles us with the ideas of progress and with the spread of techniques of alienation that turn both humans and other beings into resources. Such techniques have segregated humans and policed identities, obscuring collaborative survival.” (Tsing, 19) Again, I ask, what world will there be for Chiapas farmers if they cannot seek refuge from the fires in their homes? James Baldwin might warn of the fire next time, but I warn of today’s fire. And tomorrow’s; then Baldwin would be right to warn of the next, and the next.

It is obvious to see there is a need to understand Chiapas farmers as survival migrants. As their primary source of income is increasingly endangered, the world needs to understand that Mexicans from the state will be moving in ever-growing numbers, and not for any particular
political reason — they will be moving because there is no other choice. Unless policy interventions can be made.

*Pricing floors are needed for this crop to survive*

Now that we have detailed the ins and outs of Capeltic, it is easier to say a somewhat fringe theory is more legitimate: the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 was precipitated by a collapse in coffee prices. Understanding the macroeconomic push and pull on coffee producers, like those who were paid so little in oro and pergamino prices at Yomol A’tel, can highlight the need for better protections and solutions, using amplified counter-narratives to make those points heard and understood, as a safeguard against violence and disaster, and further misunderstanding.

Coffee producers are not only vulnerable to production shocks, but price shocks as well. Since 1980, the price of coffee has been as high as $2.53 per pound and as low as $0.53 per pound, with boom and bust cycles throughout. What makes price volatility particularly problematic for producers is lag between price signals and production decisions. Unlike crop annuals, coffee trees take four years to reach maturity. Thus producers cannot respond to take advantage of positive price shocks, nor can singular harvest pivots be achieved either. Unlike most fruit production, coffee cherries possess essentially no nutritional value as means of subsistence (de Melo Pereira, 2020). This means that coffee producers have to commit in advance to their production capacity and can either experience a production drought, or a price shock that will wipe out profit margins and leave growers with no alternative use for the harvest. Turbulent pricing introduces considerable instability in the lives of coffee farmers, and policymakers have long-sought to develop mechanisms to eliminate uncertainty for growers.

The International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1963 was considered a successful strategy to mitigate some of coffee’s pricing issues. The ICA was established with the goal of regulating
prices to a sufficiently high level, and providing exporting countries with production quotas in an effort to control supply levels. This system became the backbone of various subsequent agreements from the 1960s to the 1980s.

By the 1980s, however, an increasingly neoliberal United States contributed to a stratification of the industry and players. As the end of the decade reared its head there came a perfect storm. The semi-annual reviewing of quotas and prices was coming up, and to buyers in the United States it looked like the negotiations weren’t going anywhere. Many importing countries decided it would be better to let the quotas expire. Why this happened is up to perpetual scrutiny. A Chicago Tribune article in 1989 claimed consumer tastes were changing to lighter, milder tastes. A more critical lens claims the United States simply didn’t care to support producing countries, many of which had been in the long shadow of the USSR, once the Cold War was considered a non-threat (Vargas, 10). Regardless of the motivation, in 1989 quotas ended and the international coffee supply increased significantly. The price for commodity coffee fell from a high of $2.00 per pound in 1986 to $0.65 per pound by 1992. Producing countries lost much of their bargaining power, grower’s incomes were halved, and incidences of violence were found in the wake of price collapses in Rwanda.

Verwimp's article, "The Political Economy of Coffee, Dictatorship, and Genocide," provides an analysis helpful in answering the question of how coffee price volatility fueled conflict in Rwanda. In the period under investigation (the 1980s to the 1990s), land was scarce, the population was dense, and labor (in this case the key factor endowment) was abundant and cheap. The climate was ideal for coffee production, and thanks to successful ICA regulation, prices were high. The Rwandan government took this opportunity to maximize domestic coffee output. It heavily subsidized production and provided coffee plants, fertilizer, and other inputs to growers.
It also adopted policies of forced crop cultivation, requiring land to be used for coffee instead of other crops. Citizens found destroying coffee plants or growing other crops faced significant fines. The government’s push for increased coffee production left the Rwandan economy highly dependent on coffee commodity prices. During the time period of the 1970s to the early 1990s, coffee exports represented between 60 to 80 percent of all export revenue. In such an environment, fluctuations in the price of one commodity could have devastating economic effects.

During this same time period, the government established a monopsony where a state agency paid all coffee farmers a predetermined price for coffee, a practice common across African coffee industries at the time. The justification for this monopsony was to guarantee income for producers and insulate them from exogenous price shocks. The state was supposed to store profit, which was derived from the difference in international prices and the prices paid to farmers, in a price stabilization fund. During periods of declining coffee prices, this fund could be used to pay farmers living wages regardless of industry price trends. Verwimp finds that the government perpetually diverted profits from the stabilization fund and used them for other purposes, which left Rwandan growers increasingly vulnerable to a collapse in coffee prices. It also made coffee a critical source of government revenue, and various state functions depended on a steady stream of coffee profits.

When international prices plummeted in the early 1990s, the government slashed producer wages by 47 percent (figure 2) and cut social services by 40 percent (Verwimp, 162). All the while, Rwanda was the recipient of substantial foreign aid, but most of it never reached the poor. Instead, this funding was used to increase the government’s consumption and consolidate its power, and served as an alternative income source for the government when coffee revenue dried up. The state failed to support the livelihoods of its farmers, and loyalty to the Habyarimana regime, the
government in power at the time, rapidly declined. This was the beginning of significant economic and political uncertainty for the country.

Before going further, it is important to note that the government in the 1990s was Hutu-led, and a vast majority of coffee producers were Hutu (the minority Tutsi population was largely employed in ranching). Amid rising tensions between growers and the government, the state masked its failures by blaming the wealthy Tutsi minority. It depicted this group as rebels and enemies in order to scare Hutus into continued support of Habyarimana. Its anti-Tutsi rhetoric actively promoted displacement, looting, and violence against Tutsis. Per Verwimp, plundering the Tutsi population provided much-needed resources for the government to maintain its military and prevented Hutus from taking political action against the regime. In a sense, Hutus could recover financial losses from coffee by taking resources from Tutsis. Then, in April 1994, Habyarimana was killed when his plane was shot down. Immediately afterward, a 100-day genocide against Tutsis ensued.

While ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis were pre-existing, analyzing the impacts of the coffee industry in this context provides numerous helpful insights. This case first shows the danger of a highly undiversified economy reliant on volatile commodities. Second, it shows that mechanisms such as ICA quotas and price mandates, or national price stabilization funds, are essential for economic stability and protection of growers’ livelihoods. Third, it shows that there might exist an opportunity cost between coffee production and conflict. When Hutus lost their sole income source, the only option left was to take what they could from the Tutsis.

Figure 1 displays the international price of coffee, dating back to 1980. What is observed is how the price of coffee spiked in 1986, and with the impending collapse of coffee production quotas, the price began to crash with the introduction of excess production. Since then the price
has continued to be volatile.

Figure 2 compares the prices coffee producers received relative to the international price. While the individual prices are consistently lower than what the international market displays, the prices are highly correlated. This correlation breaks down during the dismantlement of the ICA, with the international coffee price dropping, while the prices given to Rwandan producers continue to rise. This can be attributed to the use of Rwanda’s price stabilization fund. Once the stabilization fund collapsed, the price to producers realigned with the international price drop. Figure 3 focuses on the leading up to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, and what the annual prices were that Rwandan coffee producers received.

Figure 4 pairs the price received and coffee production quantities in Rwanda leading up to 1994. From here, one observes how production is increasing while prices continue to fall. The more of a subsidy that the price stabilization provides, the more production increases, which put the fund in an increasingly larger deficit. But even when the fund begins to break, and price starts to come down, production continues to increase. Since producers are path-dependent on coffee production, they cannot dynamically change outputs. Thus as the price begins to fall, supply is not able to adjust to find an equilibrium. Instead, the investment of planting new trees during the good years is now in production, and the only way forward is to maximize individual investment and cultivate the max amount of crop yields; thus further perpetuating the downward cycle. This continues until the fund completely collapses, the economy crashes, and the entire domestic coffee market shuts down as both price and production seize up.

Figure 5 demonstrates Rwanda’s historical dependency on coffee production. Prior to 1994, the lowest percentage of exports that coffee accounted for by value was 40 percent and the highest was 83 percent, with the mean average of 62 percent from 1961 through 1993. Since 2000,
the mean average of export weight for coffee was 16 percent, with the lowest points being in 2019 and 2017, where coffee accounted for only 6.12 percent of Rwandan total export value.

Figure 6 observes Rwandan production compared to its overall dependence on coffee over time. What is notable here is to focus on the most recent years, since coffee production has increased significantly in the past five years. During the years of 2015 to 2019, average production was 29,131 tons, while the five years prior averaged 19,172, a 52 percent increase in production. Why this is not alarming is that Rwanda’s coffee export dependency has come significantly down. To demonstrate how Rwanda has grown in diversifying its production portfolio, in 2018, coffee production was over 38,000 tons, almost identical to what was produced in 1992. The difference is that in 1992, coffee exports accounted for 51 percent of export value, meanwhile in 2018 the percentage was 6.4 percent.

In summary of this recommendation, in Rwanda up to 80 percent of its revenue was from coffee leading up to its genocide. It was highly vulnerable to price shocks and it had failed to properly implement a price stabilization mechanism. The disenfranchisement of producers during the collapse of coffee prices fueled mass violence toward Tutsis that ended in genocide. The relationship between prices and conflict is true for various other commodities, too. One such commodity is the banana, which is one of the most-consumed fruits worldwide and is produced on mass-scales. Generally, natural resources that require high labor-inputs (as opposed to products like oil with high capital inputs) are most-prone to similar price/conflict trends. Price reductions in those commodities drive down hours and wages, and simultaneously reveal increases in appropriative activities and violence (the opportunity cost effect). As such, the safety and stability of agricultural regions depends, to an extent, on price stability and mechanisms that insulate growers from shocks.
Figure 1

Annual Average Closing Price of Coffee

Figure 2

Prices paid to producers by Country vs. Average global price.
Figure 3

Rwanda (Paid to Growers)

Price per pound of coffee

$0.26 $0.50 $0.75 $1.00


Year

Figure 4

Rwanda Coffee Production

Coffee per pound paid to producers

Coffee Produced in tons

Coffee Production Coffee price (Paid to Growers)
Figure 5

Rwanda Coffee Percentage of Total Exports

Figure 6

Rwanda Coffee Production vs. Weight of Exports

Fourth Wave
The relevant praxis regarding counter-narration, then, is not one of aesthetics. What is important to take away from this section is that what I am suggesting is not just a path forward, but the path forward. The easiest way to understand this portion of my argument is to ask oneself: has Fair Trade, and current understandings of coffee farmers, made livelihoods better? Clearly not.

Joseph Nevins has conducted a plethora of research regarding migration, coffee, and death. One might take this for grim, but to drive home the importance of this argument we must understand the stakes. Nevins, for example, points to a World Bank report in 2004. The report indicates that coffee as an industry should blame low prices of the bean on “overproduction by coffee-producing countries and agricultural subsidies paid by Northern governments to their own farmers”, fully shifting the blame to the particular behaviors of coffee drinkers in the United States and other global North countries. The report is issued in 2004, decades after the establishment of Fair Trade, and points to many of the same issues that Fair Trade was an alleged response to at its inception. The decrease in compensation for coffee had become so bad that in regions like Chiapas, so far south and Mexico’s largest coffee producing region that historically migration was quite low, has now seen “upwards of 70 percent of the residents of some of the area’s communities have left, with most going to the United States.” (Nevins, 2007. P. 237)

In the brevity of this paper it is difficult to say this any more clearly while still creating space for the context this argument requires: if this project of development-style coffee buying and selling worked, wouldn’t it have done so by now? The narration that Fair Trade is solving the problem is a false narrative (albeit the dominant narrative) and the counter narrative, that Mexicans who have never before needed to leave their homes but are now fleeing to try and reclaim some financial power, is what needs addressing. In fact, Nevins further addresses this:
To the extent that scholarship and other representations fail to explore and explicate properly the link between commodity regimes, international out-migration and migrant deaths, they contribute to the fatalities. Such representations are related to a conservative, or non-progressive, sense of place that fails to appreciate the non-bounded nature of places. They grow out of and help to reproduce a nationalist imaginary — one brought about through a particular social spatialisation — one that is “territorially trapped” and also politically-economically deficient. (Nevins, 2007. p. 242)

Sedgewick adds: “When working conditions on ethically certified plantations are revealed to be something other than what has been promised, worse than everyone knows they should be, working people have a simple explanation for why: ‘There’s no food unless you earn it.’ (Weather Films, 2016) There is no principle more fundamental to the way the modern world works.” (Sedgewick, 2020. P. 359) One can reasonably conclude that Fair Trade, and the neoliberal coffee regime as it has existed thus far, do not work. In fact, what would it look like to further extend this political-economy framework to the conversation? Thankfully, some in the industry are doing just that.

Since the 1970s, it has been correctly stated that political economic theory has made its way to farming and farmers. (Labao & Meyer, 2001. p. 116) This examination of political economy is most commonly examined through what Wrecking Ball Coffee co-founder Trish Rothgeb calls coffee’s “waves.” The industry widely recognizes three waves: the first wave is mass commercialism like Folgers, second wave coffee reflects the branding and coffee shop for consumers like Starbucks, and third wave coffee which reflects a focus on production and taste
like Blue Bottle. How farmers have been treated, ethically and economically, reflects throughout the ascent of the waves. Fair Trade made its debut in the second wave and runs parallel to these waves, though many cite the phenomenon as progress. (Sylla, N., & Leye, D. 2014) Some have been bold enough to describe a definitive fourth wave — and fifth wave, and sixth wave — but the majority in the industry do not make such audacious claims. (Oswald)

Thinking about what the industry is actually possible of doing for itself, Hardin’s input is useful: “one effect of the full-tilt normative debate about whether corporate conservation entails the betrayal of indigenous peoples, grassroots environmentalism, and particular ways of valuing nature outside of markets has been to obscure finegrained comparison of the range of approaches emerging and their transformative roles within institutions or individual lives.” (184) We must accept the changes where they already are, what is possible, and what channels are functional through the coffee market system. Kohler’s insights into the specialty market is useful, too, when thinking about what can be done through Capeltic. The book opens with “the starting point of this work is the puzzle arising from the fact that, although less than 1% of world coffee supply is certified by fair trade organizations, all major players satisfying consumer demand (Nestle, Starbucks, big retailers, etc.) claim to be ‘fair’.” (Preface)

Many companies will never do this. In “Corporate Social Responsibility of Foreign Multinationals in a Developing Country Context: Insights from Pakistan” the authors (Yunis, Jamali, and Hashim, 2018) report that multinationals tend to ignore CSR. But plenty of multinationals can pull this off: one such excerpt is Port of Mokha coffee, run by Tenderloin born-and-raised Yemeni American Mokhtar Alkhanshali. His work, which led to the first Yemeni national coffee auction held in San Rafael, California in the spring of 2022, has led to the material improvement of Yemeni farmers’ lives at a time wherein their government cannot
support them. His coffee has sold for $16 a cup, and his relationships with farmers guarantees their payment. (Eggers)

Another useful example is Utz Kapeh, a Mayan foundation based in Guatemala and the Netherlands. Utz Kapeh means “a good cup of coffee” and was initially set up by the Dutch company Ahold. (Ponte, 13) In another research project, and more specificity on the companies’ roles rather than purely environmental, Ponte’s second article goes into depth on specialty coffee responses with a CSR lens: “The specialty industry is experimenting with at least three combinations of standards and forms of coordination to ensure that the value added of high quality coffee is transmitted all the way to producers: (1) “relationship coffees”; (2) competition-auction events; and (3) geographic appellation systems.” (Ponte 2002, 17) Though there are critiques to the approaches, detailing CSR programs like the Cup of Excellence (rewarding farmers for the quality of their product) are important in the vein of how we incorporate these strategies into environmentalism. (Ponte 2002, 18) Another such recommendation by Rimburg also includes agricultural education provided by the companies to locals.

As many early Fourth Wave adopters have shown, inclusion and diversity do need to be a part of the equation. Some research indicates that, yes, female executives prioritize CSR, but rather than risk aversion they do it for altruistic purposes. Additionally, perhaps most relevantly, would be showing a Chinese law that they tied to a higher degree of CSR: “when engaging in business activities, a company shall abide by laws and administrative regulations, observe social morality and business ethics, and act in good [faith].” (Zou, 1) What is difficult when understanding this issue from a postcolonial and economic lens is the position this leaves generational farmers in today. Contemporary research has now been conducted that confirms that those who work in colonial industries like coffee and sugar actually do have better livelihoods.
(Dell and Olken, 2020) How we pursue those industries going forward, however, and how to navigate these spaces in conversation with farmers when actually hearing their testimony has many lessons to be learned from research that came into existence as a counter-ballast to the Friedman-era neoliberalism push. (Schumacher, 1973) We can find intersections of these ideas in the alternative economic models that are centered on the poor, for example the focolare movement that Lorna Gold writes about.

If Fourth Wave does exist, it needs to be seen in this form of solidarity and alternative economic structures. Gene Sharp’s how-to guide on organizing is useful here. Military might not equaling control or victory is a great concept that is important for resisters, and does add to morale as Sharp points out. Having a strong economic alternative, which is paramount in the coffee industry as I have pointed out, is one such form of controlling initiative from one’s own vantage. For example, demonstrating to customers the severity of the working and climate conditions of coffee farmers rather than an unnecessarily chipper spin on the circumstances would allow the producers to control their narrative power rather than constantly releasing it through the often racist stereotyping of farmers that multinational corporations, and even Yomol A’tel, encourage for their own marketing. This is, as Sharp points out, a way to “undermine the opponents’ source of power.” (71) The current strategy, to bow to the external pressure, is “impotent” as Sharp would say. (74) Sharp points out that those who see these new forms of organization and marketing from Capeltic (or other cooperatives) will be confused or resistant, followed by repression. The control of information as a response is exactly what the MNC coffee companies have always done; the “false news reports.” Economic sanctions are, of course, classic techniques deployed against commodity producers. (Sharp, 85 - 90) Persistence is indeed the only way to overcome the challenges. Overcoming these brutalities, as Sharp words it, has
been what coffee producers have already been doing, even while succumbing to outside demands. Legitimate alternative solutions is the next step, as the brutalities are no worse when struggling for higher prices and better lives. Thankfully, as I also recommend, solidarity can be found by banding together with local and federal governments against Global North governments and buyers. This subversion — creating systems to bring more customers to Chilón, creating unity with other coffee growing communities, showing the world who the organizers really are — is political jiu jitsu. (Sharp, 112)

**Political Economic Infrastructure**

There are clear recommendations and steps that stakeholders in this conversation can take to implement the idea of counter-narration as access to the political economy. First we can think again of Rothgeb’s ideas of coffee waves: there is an emerging trend regarding a fourth wave, or the idea that coffee be consumed in its countries of origin. An initiative in Indonesia that represents the fourth wave was a Specialty Coffee Association of America wheel written in with Indonesian flavors and tastes, launched by Seniman Coffee. Owner of Seniman Coffee, Rodney Glick, mentions how this idea of fourth wave is “Coffee-growing countries that start to focus on their own coffee,” and that it can be seen all over the world including “Africa, Brazil, and Colombia.” (Goldberg 2020)

Again, it is important to emphasize the reality of the political-economic intersection: this has a financial imperative attached to it beyond some politically correct facade. Colombians consume only about 10 percent of their own cash crop. (Gonzales-Perez & Guiterrez-Viana, 2015. p. 9) Coffee companies can incorporate systems that amplify the voices of their own farmers *while creating a new market to sell their coffee into.*
Another implication for a political economy that includes coffee farmers in an equitable way is the way companies take the steps of reframing themselves as interpolators rather than storytellers. Marketing teams of all sizes, from multinational corporations to smaller companies, can find ways to include coffee farmers in their advertising campaigns. At best, this would look like bringing coffee farmers into your company in legitimate ways beyond just as marketing opportunities; Mayra Orellana-Powell is a generational coffee farmer in La Paz, Honduras who both runs Catracha Coffee and works in partnerships for Royal Coffee in Oakland. How did that position become available to her? Royal Coffee brought in one of their producers into a salaried position, securing a long-term relationship with their producer and walking the walk of farmer livelihood opportunity. (Interview conducted by author, 2020)

If we see people who grow, produce, cultivate, inherit, and process coffee as “farmers” and nothing more, we do them more than a disservice — we rob them of resource. We rob ourselves of our common humanity. “We have no shared idea of what it means to be connected to faraway people and places through things. We have no common language for talking about the world in terms of the lives ours depend on.” (Sedgewick, 2020. p. 356)

Listening to coffee farmers’ stories, their own narratives, also has implications for policy. The International Coffee Agreement, which again lasted from 1962 to 1989, cost the United States more money to ensure a price floor for Mexican coffee farmers. It dissolved against Mexican pleas to hoard U.S. dollars. (Nevins, 2007) This aligns with what we hear from coffee farmers in Guatemala, for example:

Miguel, a forty-one-year-old Ladino farmer from Huehuetenango, observed: ‘We have to put food on the table, but we would also like other things, for our children to go to
school, and for this it [coffee] isn't sufficient. So we feel constrained, and we are in a bad place if somebody in the family gets sick.

As we understand this to be a dying crop that promotes death, in the long term, for the people who grow it and the planet it is grown upon, we can understand that we are asking coffee farmers to engage in what Tsing calls salvage accumulation. As this intersects with hearing people’s stories and lives as a form of political economic salvation, Tsing writes: “It is time to pay attention…Not that this will save us — but it may open our imaginations.”

Even if we don’t like what we hear from the mouths of workers, and especially if this harms MNCs brand images, we can think of Tsing’s input once again: “If a rush of troubled stories is the best way to tell about contaminated diversity, then it’s time to make that rush part of our knowledge practices.” (Tsing, p. 34) This is why this position regarding what farmer lives look like is started with poet Juan Felipe Herrera: real stories, told by real people, rather than the flattened narrative.

**What can Capeltic, or other companies, concretely take away?**

“Construyendo Una Nueva Historia” was written in red paint on buildings and signs all through Chilón and the surrounding areas. Farmers and managers let me know this is a project led by the Mexican government that builds parks and resources in rural areas, and I felt that this could be a chance to work with local government to build out Chilón as a coffee destination. As many of my interviewees highlighted, visiting the fields and understanding producer’s lives in a holistic way, not a racialized way or in a purely academic way, makes a tangible difference in channeling that top-down pressure from global expectations into tangible resource for the
community. Money is spent in the area, and understanding is grown. Creating connections with local municipal officials would be paramount. Easier said than done; some researchers have found that well-executed programs like the FEC in Mexico, to stave off environmental degradation in coffee agricultural areas, “by itself, probably did little to stem tree cover loss in Mexico’s Coast and Southern Sierra coffee-growing area.” (17) They found that raising the price floor to attract more farmers could be one solution to the issue, however. Diverting more money to the FEC program may not have been feasible, economically or politically, as most Mexicans do not realize the significance of the coffee trade in Mexico. (18) Re-allocating current fiscal resources, cutting red tape and making the program more accessible to rural producers, could be a solution, and shows a way forward for municipal cooperation like what could happen in Chilón.

State-supported enterprises show high promise for ethics and profit. For state-owned enterprises in China, some research finds that institutional ownership, as a restraining force against the inclination to pursue profit exclusively, can provoke a higher attention to CSR requirements in Chinese companies on the coast. “(1) Institutional ownership has a significant positive impact on CER. (2) Different institutional ownerships have different willingness to intervene in the corporate governance and supervise the performance of CER due to the characteristics, shareholding objectives and shareholding scale. (3) Compared with general enterprises, state-owned enterprises bear more social objectives besides economic objectives. In state-owned enterprises, institutional ownership can better promote the implementation of CER.” (Shi, 11)

The campaign that I discussed with my interviewees throughout my research could be positive, too. The coffee bag, for all of the positive effort of the cooperative and its stakeholders,
falls into the same cavernous racialization that dominant narrative power demands. There are no photos on the Nuestra Mezcla blend, and the same stereotypical stencils — facing away from the consumer — on the organic bag. At this late moment in the thesis, I do not need to detail the issues here.

**Figure F**

![Image of coffee bags](image)

I have included photos of farmers Victor Jimenez, Omar, Pablo, and Don Narcisso as images that could be plastered, front and center, on the bags in the future for an at first limited experimental campaign. On the back of the bags would be excerpts from interviews with the farmers themselves, with a call to action about the ethics of coffee below. As we are talking
about efficacy in creating political economic opportunity for producers, it would be key to track sales to see if the tactic was productive — if not, abandon the effort.
Figure G
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