

The Crisis of Profitability and Starbucks' Discourse of Cultural Appropriation

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Writer's comment: I can't remember the process of writing this paper as much as the ideas behind it, which proves to me how natural and necessary writing the paper was to me. The biggest influence on this paper was the way that Roger Rouse and his TA Ellen Woodall spoke. Roger would give a fluid, beautifully crafted piece of oration that would last exactly one hour and twenty minutes, without any interruption, punctuating his sentences with this kind of funny, *knowing* smile and sips of coffee. Ellen never seemed at a loss for words either, speaking about the readings and lectures with a controlled urgency that had an emotional resonance, a resonance which was, after all, the reason I took the course. This topic was the most direct way that I could get into those nebulous buzzwords for our age: postmodernism and globalization. The class seized me and I tried to reciprocate, to enter into a dialogue with these ideas that seemed so remote, so theoretical. So I hope that this paper will be seen in the same terms as I wrote it, as a beginning. I encourage those who read it to make it relevant, to agree or disagree forcefully, and, in the process, to enter into a critical dialogue with the forces that shape our minds, our worlds.

– *Brandon Bussolini*

Instructor's comment: In *The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, we explore the changing processes that simultaneously connect us to people elsewhere in the world and separate us from them. One way we do this is by looking at commodities we commonly consume, the ways they are marketed, and the experiences of the people who produce them. For the mid-term essay, students put what they have learned to use by doing a mini-research project on Starbucks. Among the many fine essays produced in this context, Brandon's stands out. He blends a sophisticated reading of texts from the course, a subtle interpretation of Starbucks' marketing techniques, and a keen attention to the struggles of the people who produce the corporation's coffees. Just as importantly, his prose crackles with the conviction that these issues matter. If you want to work out better where you stand, read on.

– *Roger Rouse, Anthropology Department*

Ian Skoggard in his article "Transnational Commodity Flows" aptly and disconcertingly states that "the ladder as a metaphor for social mobility has been replaced by a wall or a cliff, which requires technical aides to surmount" (68); indeed, in the age of "globalization and the over accumulation of capital" (Skoggard 67) by decentralized, ubiquitous corporations, social classes within nation-states and the world at large are becoming increasingly polarized as the division between producer and consumer becomes ever more pronounced. Starbucks' meteoric rise to market dominance in the area of gourmet coffee has been made possible largely through its ingenious and deliberately obscuring marketing techniques, which take full advantage of the invisibility of labor and the fetishization of commodities which are hallmarks of the contemporary, postmodern world in which we, the consumers of Starbucks coffee, live. By selectively drawing on the colonial, exotic history of coffee, an act which Michael D. Smith terms "discursive appropriation" (505) of the imperial past, Starbucks creates a narrative of quality, tradition, adventure, and, most importantly, authenticity that deliberately omits any mention of the disastrous effects of deregulation of the coffee market on the smallholders and plantation workers.

This narrative which Starbucks has constructed and continues to elaborate upon to define and sell its goods is defined by the postmodern principle of pastiche: juxtaposing words, images, and ideas from widely different sources to create something new. This technique is at the center of Starbucks' global campaign to shape the imaginations of its customers in a way that is economically conducive for the corporation. Once we begin to look critically at the way that Starbucks markets itself and constructs its image, we can equally begin to reveal the questionable business practices that go unchecked and which serve to further Starbucks' fortune; in this way, by juxtaposing the global reality with the engineered fantasy which few are privy to, we can begin to discern the new global social order, where we stand within this disproportionate hierarchy, and, most importantly, what our responsibilities are— both intellectually and economically—to those who are invisible to us, hidden behind our valorization of the material object. As Michael D. Smith reminds us, "pleasures often are predicated upon privileges, as well as upon exploitation and oppression, and need to be interrogated as such" (505). Thus, an investigation of the disconnection between Starbucks' image and production processes which result in the commodity should equally be an investigation of our own disconnection from this global system and our own rituals of consumption and their implications

within an increasingly interconnected (and divided) world.

Through its packaging, posters, design, and literature, Starbucks creates from the act of consumption an imaginary, hedonistic cultural tourism which draws freely on images and language from both the past and present in order to entice consumers to buy their product and its manufactured meaning. In his critique of Banana Republic's former marketing techniques as displayed through its catalogues, Paul Smith states "it is the multivocalism of the catalogues that is their most obvious postmodern feature. The heterogeneity of the discourses contained here produces a kind of swirling texture of differences among which it is hard to discover or define any overarching principle of discursive control" (143). It is precisely through this "lack of discursive control" that Banana Republic, Starbucks, and other corporations create simultaneously a sense of novelty and tradition, distancing themselves, at least in terms of presentation, from the principles of mass production and mass consumption which define modern corporations. If we extend Smith's quote to encompass not just "multivocalism" but also the use of images and symbols which have been uprooted from their original contexts, we can begin to look at Starbucks' overall marketing campaign and to dismantle the ways in which it is designed to shape our imaginations and thus our habits of consumption.

One of the most immediately striking features about any Starbucks is the way that the coffee shops have been designed and decorated; the governing principle behind the way that Starbucks are set up seems to be one of consistency, exoticism, and, above all, authenticity. In order to construct this sense of authenticity, tradition, and superiority to other coffees, Starbucks plays "upon the historical and cultural associations of the coffee bar and the coffeehouse with a European sensibility," turning Europe into "the cultural reservoir for new models of North American urban consumption" (M. Smith 507). Although the posters, photographs, and graphic design in each Starbucks vary to some degree, they are all linked by the appropriation and re-contextualization of European imagery; invariably, every Starbucks has several mounted pieces of commercial art which help to shape the consumer's experience in the café. These pieces of art provide a basis and context for the act of consuming which is extremely important as a basis for the kind of vicarious tourism which is Starbucks' most important commodity.

What is most striking about these pieces of art is the way that they are particular distillations of the postmodern technique of pastiche; more truly assemblages than paintings, Starbucks' decorations are embodiments of the methods used by Starbucks in every aspect of its extensive marketing project which serve to signify an ostensible return

to tradition. One particularly striking piece of artwork was made up of what seemed to be pages torn out of old books; black and white photos of roman sculptures and the coliseum alongside ripped up passages from *Moby Dick* and an obscure account of an English merchant's voyage to Jamaica in the 1850s. Over these pieces of text and images jammed together like pieces from different jigsaw puzzles, the artist had painted thin washes of mellow blues, greens and yellows. The end result of the juxtaposition of these images and texts from widely different narratives is a vague evocation of a kind of authentic cosmopolitanism which draws heavily from European sources. These artworks do not only evoke a sense of continental aestheticism and tradition, but most importantly for the corporation, they strongly insinuate coffee as another element in this cultural matrix. These decorations are redolent of the potent notion of connoisseurship which is one of the main selling points of gourmet coffee; these images that populate the Starbucks discourse suggest that an appreciation of coffee is commensurate with an appreciation of fine art, literature, and music. Through the "aestheticization of the commodity" (M. Smith 506), which places coffee consumption on the same level within the Western cultural hierarchy as the appreciation of fine wine, Starbucks has implemented "a marketing strategy in which one must *know* coffee to consume it" (M. Smith 509). Thus, paying four dollars for a cup of coffee infused with steamed milk is legitimized in consumers' minds because they are equally consuming the idea that not only are they having an aesthetic, exotic experience, but they are also differentiating themselves from the consumers of mass-market goods that lack the complexity and subtlety of coffee.

In addition to visual aides, Starbucks also constructs its European gourmet flair through its own invented and appropriated language. When first ordering a drink, many Starbucks patrons are confounded by the way that Starbucks' drink size system is organized; in a reversal of common consumption knowledge, the smallest drink offered by Starbucks is a "Tall." Such a seemingly insignificant shift in terminology nonetheless serves a vital function in Starbucks' campaign to restructure the consumer's imagination. According to William Roseberry, "the new coffees seem to connect with a more genuine past before the concentration and massification of the trade" (764); indeed, by creating (as Professor Rouse termed it) a new vocabulary and "syntax" of coffee consumption through the appropriation of quasi-European phrases, Starbucks has effected a radical break from the "standardized notions of quality and taste" that emerged with the creation of a "national market" for coffee in the first three decades of the nineteenth century (Roseberry 764).

However, Starbucks as much *affects* as *effects* their difference from mass-market consumption practices. Few consumers think about the fact that they are consuming twenty ounces of coffee when they order with gusto a “venti” (twenty in Italian), and fewer realize that nothing empirically separates what they have ordered from a twenty ounce chug bucket, a beverage which most customers of Starbucks would be ashamed to carry around. However, the fact remains that Starbucks offers a twenty ounce serving of coffee, an unnecessarily large amount which in everything but name is very much in keeping with American practices of bulk consumption. The size of Starbucks drinks and the rigid syntax of ordering seem to be at odds with Howard Schulz’s comment that “coffee is the wine of the nineties” (M. Smith 506) and the cult of connoisseurship which is a very large part of Starbucks’ discourse. The goal of connoisseurs is to experience the beverage—whether it be coffee or wine—by using the whole mouth to taste, feel, and judge the liquid. This process implies a kind of moderation and restraint that, ironically, Starbucks destroys by trying to sell in bulk quantities of standard quality. Thus, gourmet vocabulary such as “Venti” gives a semblance of European refinement and moderation to an American tendency to overindulge that the Yuppies who frequent Starbucks would be loath to acknowledge directly.

Although the cultural and historical geography of Europe is invoked in both the art and language used by Starbucks, the goal and end result of the juxtaposition of both images and language from the continent is not so much to give a sense of place, but rather to prepare the consumer’s mind for the vicarious journey offered through Starbucks coffees, a journey which turns out to be a re-tracing of colonial trajectories through the third world. Although Starbucks changes the terms of the colonial encounter in its accounts of its own interactions with farmers and smallholders as well as in the imagined journeys that it has engineered for its consumers, this turns out to be a subterfuge which is ultimately incapable of overshadowing a reality which is in many ways a re-colonization. In the graphic art used for packaging and decoration as well as in their vocabulary of connoisseurship, Starbucks evokes a specifically and exclusively European elegance and quality. Visually, there are few if any references to the third-world coffee production sites that supplies Starbucks with coffee; in this sense, Starbucks differs from competitors such as Peet’s who utilize ethnic designs from coffee-producing countries on their packaging to establish a connection with an exotic third world. Starbucks approaches the idea of the exotic and unknown in a different manner, one which is exemplified by the Starbucks Passport. Michael D. Smith calls it the

“most astonishingly overt expression” (518) of Starbucks’ revitalizing of the “colonial sediment in the popular imaginary of the West” through the creation of a kind of “coffee tourism” wherein coffee becomes “a vehicle for symbolic adventure overseas” (517). The Starbucks Passport, a promotion tool designed for dedicated consumers (or Starbucks “partners”) who want to get started on their “coffee journey”, is a conflation of what might be termed a travel log, coffee phrasebook, and a “cognitive map”

(515) of coffee and the geography of coffee production—that is to say, it contains areas for the coffee consumer to write down their observations as they taste the different blends offered by Starbucks, a glossary of coffee terms (some of which are invented), and brief description of each coffee’s origin and defining characteristics. The Passport is a way of establishing a home base in the pastiche European connoisseur culture of Starbucks from which consumers can make forays into the third world; in other words, coffee consumption is portrayed in the Passport as an opportunity to experience the “overwhelming ‘otherness’” of imagined third world peoples by reenacting “the history of European overseas expansion, conquest, and colonization” (M. Smith 517, 515). However, through the terms of these imaginary encounters with third world peoples are largely construed to be positive exchanges of culture, the history upon which they draw belies a contemporary recolonization of the third world—one which is economic rather than political.

In the geography of the third world offered by Starbucks on the website and which the Starbucks Passport draws upon, the third world is broken up into three discrete areas of coffee production, and then transformed into an array of spices. The Starbucks website describes these three areas—which it defines as Africa/Arabia, Latin America, and the Pacific—in terms of the sensuous properties of their coffees; hence, Africa/Arabia becomes “alluring and complex...causing even seasoned specialty coffee drinkers to wonder who dropped the blueberries and spices in their cup,” while Latin America is “generally light-to medium-bodied with clean, lively flavors,” and the Pacific is “on the opposite end of the taste spectrum from Latin American coffees...typically full-bodied, smooth, earthy, and occasionally feature[s] herbal flavor notes” (starbucks.com). As we can see from the quotes above, there is a deliberate and intricate interweaving of narratives in Starbucks’ creation of coffee territory; the juxtaposition of “seasoned coffee drinker” and the indefinite being “who dropped the blueberries and spices in their cup” suggests almost unconsciously that the drinker has been whisked away to Africa/Arabia, and is at the mercy of the nameless natives who subject him to their delicious cultural

practices. "Seasoned coffee drinker," in this instance becomes synonymous with "seasoned explorer," and it is precisely this notion that one can receive genuine cultural experiences firsthand that is at the crux of the Starbucks Passport and other marketing techniques that render the third world as a "kind of benign theme park for adults, as well as a place redolent of a certain kind of purity" (P. Smith 142).

In order to create the sensation that consuming is equivalent to expanding one's cultural horizons, Starbucks has further built on this notion of the third world as a "theme park" by describing coffee in sensualized terms, making coffee into a kind of synecdoche for the bodies and existences of third world peoples. Cultural difference and economic reality is divested of any sense of potential conflict or misunderstanding and phrased in decidedly abbreviated Anglo terms where "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks, as quoted by M. Smith 519). Starbucks continues this project of making these cultures accessible through deliberate imaginative misrepresentation to this day: in a description from their catalog, Starbucks says their eco-conscious "Conservation Colombia" coffee "offers a medium acidity surrounded by a round, soft body with subtle character and nutty nuances" (starbucks.com). In Starbucks language, every word and subtlety of phrase counts; in keeping with the notion of an interweaving of narratives and the postmodern marketing technique of pastiche, the passage quoted above deliberately appropriates and re-contextualizes terms with both gourmet and sexualized colonial connotations. The coffee "offers" its flavor, potently suggesting sexual submission and benign, respectful, and unreciprocated cultural trade; this charged word, perhaps most strikingly, calls to mind images latent in every Western person's imagination of a native offering some kind of object to the detached, superior white explorer. The potent suggestion is that the very essence of a different culture can be consumed for the pleasure and edification of the Starbucks consumer, a person who is ideologically and aesthetically grounded in the values of an imagined Europe.

Starbucks' discourse is perhaps most interesting and frightening because it overlays one domination on another; in other words, an imagined cultural exchange which draws both heavily and selectively on European colonial history is a subterfuge which obscures another kind of cultural and economic hegemony, one imposed by the United States onto a real third world. Another ramification of Starbucks' method of describing its coffees is that coffee producers are divested of any sense of corporeality in the mind of the consumer. The coffee bean takes on human characteristics which are easily engaged by the imagination of

the consumer, thus “freeing” the consumer from “the burden of considering the conditions in which their various consumables were produced” (M. Smith 503). Even more striking is the fact that Starbucks has created an ostensible counter-discourse which is meant to quell consumers’ worries about the effects of unregulated trade on the lives of coffee producers, which nevertheless uses the same narrative and descriptive techniques to divert attention away from the corporeal existence of the producers and back onto the product and its savage, exotic third world mystique.

In a portion of the Starbucks website titled “Starbucks Fact Sheet: GE-Free Ingredients, Fair Trade and Cocoa Sourcing,” the company attempts to address the increasing attention in international media given to the negative effects of deregulation and high levels of competition on coffee farmers. Although Starbucks is not in any sense completely and totally responsible for the state of affairs in the coffee market, it is guilty of using this to its best advantage. It claims on the “Fact Sheet” that “since forming an alliance with TransFair USA in April 2000, Starbucks has purchased nearly two million pounds of Fair Trade Certified coffee...the Company’s purchases have increased steadily” (starbucks.com). However, “the Company” deliberately leaves out any reference to the amount of coffee purchased that had been produced by sweated labor. Following this assertion, Starbucks goes further to justify increasingly questionable labor practices in coffee producing countries: Starbucks claims it “sources coffee from countries that are different culturally and do not have similar labor standards to the U.S. It is very common for young children to accompany parents to the workplace, as infant and toddler childcare is neither feasible nor culturally accepted in many regions.... Starbucks does not create laws in coffee producing countries, nor do we expect to change cultural norms” (starbucks.com). Here we see yet another variation on Starbucks’ postmodern narrative; Starbucks, which markets coffees using an imaginative colonial framework, is here affecting a stance of postmodern and post-colonial cultural relativism. When read outside of Starbucks’ “re-territorializing” of the world in terms of its own “coffee geography” (M. Smith 516), such a sweeping claim seems ridiculous and rather ignorant; it assumes a kind of homogeneity amongst third world peoples, that “it is common” cross-culturally among this subset of societies to bring children to the “workplace.” However, it is clear from this passage that justification of the conditions of labor in the third world is a part of the same Starbucks discourse that divides the third world into three production zones; it is only with such a circumscribed notion of what lies without our own culture that Starbucks can attempt to give such a statement any sort of

validity.

Implicit in these statements, moreover, is the notion of a certain kind of savage purity in the cultures of the third world which is equally a result of commodity fetishism and ignorance of “the new global cultural economy...a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models” (Appadurai 6). In this conception of the world, sweated labor is merely a result of different cultural practices rather than global economic forces. There is an assumed disconnection between our world and their world, and although Starbucks draws on the exoticism of these cultures to help sell its products, their attitude towards the producers is marked by a certain kind of condescension which arises from the misuse of cultural relativism. By constructing cultural difference in *contrast* to the European pastiche which dominates Starbucks’ ideology, Starbucks sees these countries and people only in terms of what they offer to consumers; underlying this notion is the idea that these countries and people are not cultural and economic consumers, that they have not been tainted by consumerism. Cultural exchange is thus a one-way process for Starbucks; the passage quoted above seems completely uninformed that modern desires to consume exist on both sides of the commodity chain. In his article “The Neoliberal World Order: the View from the Highlands of Guatemala,” John D. Abell examines the life of the family of a man he call “Don Ramón” in context of the neoliberal economic policies which have pushed real prices for coffee to all-time lows. Although the family’s income for the harvest season—the only time of year when work is more or less guaranteed— covers “only about a third of the required minimal daily caloric intake of a basic corn and beans diet,” Don Ramón “and the remaining ninety percent in Guatemala who are among the have-nots are obediently consuming soft drinks, snacks and cigarettes like there is no tomorrow” as a result of corporate marketing campaigns (Abell 39, 41). Here we see where Starbucks’ narrative ultimately fails; in the end, it relies on notions of discrete, homogeneous cultures which disconnect it from the global realities in which, as a multinational corporation, it is involved. At the same time that Starbucks is involved in shaping tastes and consuming habits not just in the U.S. but also increasingly abroad, its own rhetoric is incapable of dealing with the notion of flows of ideas, goods, and practices that are not simply constrained to be directed from the periphery to the core.

By using such a deliberately limited discourse to depict problems of global importance, Starbucks succeeds once again in manipulating the consumer’s imagination in order to reinforce practices of consumption.

In this context, Starbucks' insistence on its buyers cultivating lasting "relationships" with both "growers and suppliers" and its claims that "ALL our coffees contribute positively to the people that grow them" becomes another marketing technique wherein social responsibility on both a local and global level becomes a commodity which one buys along with the coffee itself. The image of an intrepid Starbucks buyer lying back in a hammock on the verdant green coffee farm, smoking a cigar and chatting with the round-faced, laughing locals who harvest the land is a nice image to consume and one which makes it easier to go about your business after you've consumed the coffee unburdened by your conscience, but it ultimately fails to address the issue that "for every \$4 cup of café latte sold, Don Ramón would receive about \$0.02—less than 1%," and that Starbucks buys less than 1% certified fair trade coffee and only offers it once a month to consumers as "coffee of the day" (Abell 38). Starbucks' patchwork narrative is ultimately one which avoids responsibility, whether it be the responsibility of acknowledging an empirical reality for third world peoples in the global economy above a false sense of cultural relativism or the responsibility for those in coffee producing countries who have had to bear the weight of flexible accumulation. As a result of this discourse, Starbucks consumers are deliberately disconnected from the reality of the position of coffee producers in the economic order of the world, and thus from their own position in this hierarchy. Coffee producing countries are simultaneously included in and excluded from the global economy; like many other countries, they are encouraged to focus on producing one commodity for trade on the world market rather than attempt to be self-sufficient. However, they are encouraged to do so at the same time that the commodity they are requested to produce is being devalued. Starbucks' comfortable, linear discourse does not have the capability to deal with such a contradiction simply because it is not conducive to the perpetuation of consumption which is beneficial to the company. However, it is this experience of inclusion/exclusion, of a kind of abjection that defines the position of many countries in the neocolonial world order; without the acknowledgement of this gross disparity, it is impossible to conceive of both the inequities which increasingly separate the very rich from the very poor and the ways in which these inequities are becoming invisible to us.

Starbucks is a phenomenon on a grand scale and must be analyzed as such; although it does not dominate the coffee buying market like the four major commercial buyers, the company has effectively created a new discourse on coffee which provides a fascinating look into the growing rift between consumers and producers in the global economy

and the disconnections and unseen connections between individuals in an era dominated by transnational corporations and the modern desires that these corporations market. By looking critically into the way that Starbucks deliberately markets itself, we can not only deconstruct our fetishized, commoditized view of the third world and the invisibility of production processes, but we can also begin to delineate a system of global exchange which takes place outside of the terms given by Starbucks. Thus far, we have looked into the imaginative geography constructed by Starbucks, but it is equally necessary to look into the undiscovered geography of a new world which exists outside of the essentializing claims of Starbucks. While it is essential that we take responsibility for our actions, our pleasures, and our ritual acts of consumption by de-mystifying the postmodern rhetoric of advertising and marketing strategies and understanding our position in the transnational flow of capital and culture, it is just as essential that we look more deeply into the metaphor of the "insurmountable cliff." Rather than accepting that both sides of the commodity chain are invisible to each other, separated by class and culture, we must begin to figuratively peer over the edge of the cliff and thus begin to see not only the ways in which we are disconnected by disparities in capital, but also become aware that the same global economic system that ostensibly separates us provides us with an opportunity to be more directly responsible for our choices and our privileges. Once we as consumers learn to go beyond the imagined disconnection which Starbucks tries to construct, we can begin to face the challenge of globalization and become responsible for the manifold repercussions of our decisions within the context of a global economy of both capital and culture.

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