Ingesting Places: the embodied geographies of coffee

Cannibalism and Coffee: The Embodied Geographies of Place-making

Placing Coffee

Under the arches of the rail line that feeds into London’s Cannon Street station, beneath a slow bend after London Bridge Station that causes innumerable delays for the City’s commuters, it’s always damp. Drips are common and commonly horrifying. I watch as one falls through the little hole in the lid of my paper coffee cup, and throw it into the bin. Who knows where that water’s been, or if it’s water at all, and now it’s in the coffee I bought from Monmouth for 2 pounds. Drips don’t happen in the famous Seattle-based chain coffee shop down the street, and if they did, I’d probably get a new cup for free. Then again, the chain outlet down the street doesn’t boast the same kind of provenance as Monmouth. Monmouth Coffee is ‘hand selected’ from ‘single estates’ and ‘craft roasted’ by an ‘expert team of mad roasters’. It’s also next to London’s Borough Market, helping to feed and feed off its ‘buzz’. In a place like Borough Market, where customers come to consume affective consumption experience alongside its products, drips happen but they’re part of the charm.

Borough ‘fine foods’ Market is located amidst the drips and the damp of these arches. They provide a backdrop for its distinctive visual material culture, a material culture that utilizes geographical imaginaries to variously ‘place’ the market’s products into an ethical register based on shared understandings and knowledges about where food comes from. Some of the geographies of the market, such as those about place and provenance, are explicit. These are made available to consumers through signage and displays that, along with the built environment, assemble into a material semiotic discourse about food and eating. Yet there is an implicit geography at work as well. Its unique environment, along with the wide variety of food, makes the market popular and exciting. On given trading days, Borough
Market is filled with people who come to consume its performances of food and geographies, and it is with this that makes Monmouth Coffee fit right in.

On my way back to the coffee shop, I notice just how many people carry paper cups with Monmouth’s logo on the side. One could possibly make the argument that coffee – or at least caffeine, much of which comes from Monmouth – helps to fuel the frenzy of the market by contributing to its buzz. These cups, with plastic lids and cardboard hand-insulator-sleeve-things are the material culture of coffee’s material culture. They provide the physical means for coffee to be transported and ingested throughout the market. By the time I make it to the shop, the queue winds down the step to the pavement and across the street until it resembles a mob and mingles with the throng of Borough Market. Cars edge their way through, while drivers gesticulate. To give me something to do while I wait, I read a copy of Monmouth Coffee Company’s newsletter, a file of which I have in my office. Through personalized-sounding updates, ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973) of where their coffee comes from and what it tastes like, and biographical profiles of their roasters, buyers and baristas, each newsletter each tells me about Monmouth, their various coffees, and their philosophy.

One coffee is from Mbura Farm, Kenya, but ‘it’s not your typical Kenyan’. Rather, ‘it’s more demanding in its flavours’ but ‘good for someone who wants to explore coffee a bit further’. Another is from Na Bagak Bagak, Indonesia. This one is ‘very distinctive’ with a ‘heavy body, smoky, peaty, earthy…reminiscent of fresh leafed tobacco’. Yet another is from Finca Las Bubes, Guatemala. It is ‘juicy citrus with milk chocolate, medium acidity and smooth body…an entry level coffee for those not familiar with single origin. A good place to start your coffee drinking exploration. Perfect for all day drinking’. Monmouth Coffee presents coffee drinking as a journey of discovery, which implies a kind of travel where drinkers’ bodies are on the move, travelling from place to place through coffee.
As a geographer I am interested in these places and how they relate to each other and to the multiple bodies such a journey of discovery might imply. This is the focus of this chapter; it explores the ways in which place and food (or drink) are interrelated and the ways that this interrelatedness becomes ingested by the body. It employs ‘topography,’ —an ethnographically inspired form of place-writing—to trace out the ways in which places interrelate, and in the process a kind of—a topology of food and drink emerges—through food and drink (Coles and Crang 2011). The discussion draws on some of the theoretical concerns that characterize multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) as well as some of its methodological and discursive devices. Particularly, this chapter takes the form of an essay (Adorno 1958) and uses it to follow the roaming and meanders (Geertz 1973) implicit to any consideration of topology. Likewise, methodologically at least, this chapter borrows the language of Actor-network theory (ANT), particularly as it has been reclaimed by Latour’s recent reflections. This chapter talks of ‘assemblages’ of ‘tracing out’ and of making connections, but only so far as these terms, and as well as the ideas they present, work for examining or otherwise interrogating place and place-making. To say that places have topology is to suggest that places interrelate with other places through relations organized across space and time. Topology, in this sense, destabilizes Cartesian geography by suggesting that as bodies move, places fold into each other. Distance and time are often collapsed as non-Cartesian geographies are made. Thus, topography destabilizes linear conceptions of connectivity by considering the ways in which places not only move but fold into each other through mutually constitutive processes (Coles and Crang 2011). Foodstuffs emerge as places are folded together and so to eat a food is to ingest its topology. Moreover, places are materialized through food. The biophysical elements of place, minerals, water, and climate become the very matter of a foodstuff, which upon ingestion ultimately becomes the very matter of the body. Yet places are more than their biophysical properties. They are
produced by interrelationships of material (biophysical), social and discursive elements within a particular locale, as well as by interconnection between places. By the time they are eaten, foodstuffs are more than ‘mere’ things, but complex bundles of all these relations (Eckers et al 2009). This means that places are embedded into the very materiality of foods, and so when foods are eaten these places become part of the body. Biological processes of body-making happen because of the geographical processes of place-making. To eat a food, is to eat its geography, defined as an assemblage of places. Moreover, wrapped up in this geography are a collection of bodies that inhabit, and are ingested in, the different places of coffee.

This chapter first articulates the geographical implications that surround ingestion and interrogates what it means to eat or drink place. Yet, arguing that to drink coffee is to drink a place and its geographies is not as straightforward as it seems. The geography of a foodstuff is more complex than the geography of its commodity chain might suggest (Leslie and Reimer 1999). Secondly, the chapter suggests that foodstuffs like coffee that, for one reason or another, evoke geographical knowledges about their production come from places that are imaginatively as well as materially fashioned. This imaginary emerges as discursive, social and material processes intersect. Fashioning these places, their assemblage and their ingestion are active processes of place-making that imprint the imaginary into the material and the material into the imaginary. The places this chapter follows are those of coffee. While all foodstuffs are implicitly geographic, coffee’s geographies, especially the ‘speciality’/‘specialist’ coffee that Monmouth sells, are explicit. Beans are named after the places in which they are grown – Na Bagak Bagak, Indonesia, for instance; taste-based experiences – ‘heavy body, smoky, peaty earthy…reminiscent of fresh leafed tobacco’ are attached to these places, and more generally geographical designations and signifiers arrive with coffee as part of its material culture. At Monmouth, customers are invited to ‘explore’
the taste of place, but a lot has to happen to coffee and a lot has to happen to place before they are allowed to go on this ‘journey’. Even then, the journey is biased by a tour guide who socially, discursively, and materially manipulates place and coffee, while crafting and performing its geographies. This chapter therefore follows coffee in order to critically examine the different relations of place that are variously embedded and embodied into the very stuff of coffee. In the process, it interrogates the ways these relations blend geographical imaginations and imaginative geographies to reproduce embodied geographies of coffee’s geographies. Through this perspective it seeks to understand the geographies of eating (or drinking), where they are fashioned, and what it might mean to our own bodies when we find out – If the geographies of our foods make us, what are we made of?

**Locating Place**

Because when we eat we ingest place, it is little wonder that critics of the modern, industrial food system, in which our foods have become homogenized into undifferentiated commodities that simultaneously come from anywhere and nowhere, have labelled it a ‘place-less-foodescape’ ([Holloway and Kneafsey 2000](#)). An alternative to the geographical ‘non-place’ (Auge 1995) of modern food is one where places are present or at least (re)presented. I argue that no food is ‘place-less’ and that the ‘place-less foodscape’ refers rather to a foodscape where the places that foods come from do not map onto some kind of geographical imaginary about where they ought to come from. This imparts an ethical imperative to the relationship between place and placeless. ‘Placeless’ places, often suggested as ‘typical’ to the industrialized world of food, are usually not particularly pleasant or desirable. They might be sites of disease or anxiety such as the offshore ‘factory’ chicken farm ([Wallace 2009](#)) or industrial slaughterhouse ([Dunn 2007](#)). They may be indicative of shifts in agriculture at large that have rescaled food production globally, and consolidated it into fewer and fewer producers, marginalizing people and their environments, and rendering

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places of food banal, boring or homogenous (Boyd and Watts 1997). Because they do not
fulfil an imaginary geography of food, and their ‘geographical imagination’ is limited, these
places become ‘placeless’; their foods become ‘commodities’ and their geographies are
obscured by the commodity fetish. The placeless foodscape is then critiqued for distancing
consumers from producers by disconnecting them from the social relations of production
through the commodity fetish. Researchers seek to ‘lift the veil of geographical and social
ignorance’ (Harvey 1990: 423) that underlies the commodity fetish in order to reveal the
hidden and often exploitative relations that constitute commodities. The effect of this,
however, is to spatialize ethics.

Geographical knowledge leads to an awareness of other people and other places, and
the distances over which relationships are constituted. Awareness leads to ethical and moral
outcomes (Sack 2003). The proposition of the placeless foodscape is that ‘typical’
commoditized food production relies on obscuring relationships and that eating its foods
makes (unaware) consumers complicit in the constitution of unfair and potentially immoral
geographies that characterize commodity production and capitalism. Making consumers
‘geographically aware’ however, leads them to places that make foods fit into a vision of
‘right’ or ‘proper’ production (and consumption). It is argued that through awareness,
relationships between producers and consumers or between one place and another in a
commodity system transform ‘trade into a vehicle of global solidarity between conscientious
consumers and empowered producers’ (Trentman 2007: 1081). In other words, good food is
tied to good places, and good places to good ethics. If eating food is to eat place and
geography and to be responsible for implicit ethical relations, dubious or otherwise, then it is
necessary to interrogate how these places are made and represented and how these
geographies are established.
The geo-ethical implications of the commodity fetish, alongside unveiling it, getting behind it or otherwise ‘with it’ (Cook 2006), inform both academic interest in food, as well as the ways in which food is thought of, and indeed used, food put into practice by producers, retailers and consumers. Both seem to be driven by the power of revelatory politics to reclaim food from its placeless landscape and to reconnect relations that have otherwise been broken or displaced through its commoditization. Conceptually, these projects ‘follow’ food from place to place; they describe, articulate and analyze the commodity relations of food, and variously illuminate its once-hidden geographies. Academic interest is broadly organized around notions of the ‘commodity fetish’, noted above. Yet, food practitioners, such as producers, retailers and consumers have responded to the placeless foodscape by producing, purveying and seeking-out a range of foodstuffs, production methods and specialized locales that celebrate the geographies of food. These deploy a variety of material-semiotic devices such as labelling, shop displays or, as in the case of the foods in Borough Market, an entire food retail environment, all of which fashion food into the material embodiment of their geographies. As opposed to a factory production, meat becomes ‘farm-raised’ (or ‘free-range’), bread ‘artisanal’, and fruit and vegetables ‘organic’ or ‘farm-assured’. And, regardless of whether these products are local in any legal sense, the places where they are made and geographies in which they circulate somehow all become ‘local’ as well. From this, an ethical narrative that subverts the trope of placeless food is variously woven into an imaginative geography and commodity lore about where food comes from, how it ought to be produced, and how it and its places ought to be consumed.

For something like coffee, whose geographies are only at least partially revealed, yet openly deployed, this raises question about the commodity itself: is it the bean? Is it the place? To reflect on this I turn to the work of Cook et al. (2004, 2006, 2008). Working with ideas put forward by Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), as well as the moral imperative...
set out by Harvey (1990) to unveil the commodity fetish, Cook et al. (2004) ‘follows the thing’ to examine the different ‘commodity contexts’ through which values are ascribed to objects. Along the way, they interrogates the spatial dynamics of these values as objects move from context to context, or indeed through time and space. This perspective problematizes the ways in which commodity fetishes and commodity ‘double fetishes’ obscure as well as inform their own geographies (see also Cook and Crang 1996). Extending these arguments with reflection on topology and topography illustrates how relations of place and place-making are at the centre of object/commodity contexts, and indeed are these contexts. Values are ascribed to objects in place, as well as ascribed to place. What this means is that for some commodities, such as coffee, or ‘specialist’ food more generally, part of the value(s) that makes it a commodity lie in how some aspects of its production are celebrated and others ignored or even obscured (see also Baker and O’Connor, this volume).

Through this, some places are made visible and others invisible. For coffee these places of visibility are places where coffee is grown and in cases like that of Monmouth, roasted. These places of celebration however are themselves produced within an imaginary and discursive field that creates geographical narratives of coffee. This goes beyond Cook and Crang’s (1996) notion of ‘double’ commodity fetish because the exchange value of coffee relates to the bio-physicality of its cultivation as well as to how these physical processes are managed, translated and ultimately performed, to customers and to various producing and consuming bodies along coffee’s already-contentious ‘commodity chain’. The value of coffee is physically and affectively embodied when coffee is ingested, and is reproduced as these bodies move through space. Rather than being fixed, these embodied commodity processes are constituted through flows and circuits within porous and leaky spaces and are ultimately held in tension by and between other places. Commodities are therefore topological and paying attention to this topography teases out ways in which bodies are made to be (in)visible.
within these geographies, as well as ways in which bodily traces of place – visible or otherwise – are imbedded into the materiality of the bean. If Cook et al.’s project is to ‘follow things’ (ref. needed) in order to better understand their commodity contexts, then here I am following the places where things and their ‘contexts’ are constituted.

**Narrating Place**

On my way to get a new coffee, I have ended up at Monmouth’s warehouse and roasterie located in Bermondsey talking to AJ. She tells me that ‘green coffee is valueless. It takes roasting…burning it to get anything out of it…roasting enhances characteristics already there in the bean, so you need to start with good beans’. The company’s chief roaster, Angela, agrees. She tells me that roasting ‘is about releasing potential…you can’t bring out good flavours from bad beans…hide them, perhaps, but you can’t add anything that isn’t already there’. Good beans, at least for Monmouth and other dealers in ‘specialist’ coffees come from locales whose biophysical properties are capable of producing desirable flavours and aromas in coffee. Sourcing ‘high quality coffee beans [from these locales] is a crucial activity in achieving the strategic objectives of speciality coffee firms’ (Donnet, Weatherspoon, et al 2007:3). Monmouth Coffee Company sells top-quality coffee beans, and it secures these beans by travelling to their sites of origin, and sampling and tasting prospective products. When suitable beans are located, it develops long-term contracts with producers to ensure their supply. AJ tells me that she is interested in sourcing coffee that she thinks her customers would like. ‘When I taste’, she says, ‘I generally have flavours in mind for each coffee that reflect how varietals from different regions should taste. You don’t compare different regions, or different varietals, but the same from different farms, or different producers, but always from the same general region with similar taste profiles’.
Over the years, the coffee industry, a collective or producers, exporters, importers, roasters and retailers, has, by consensus, developed formalized schema through which coffee growing regions are categorized. Producing a taste profile entails a series of tasting rituals where members of the industry gather to ‘cup’ – meaning to taste through proscribed procedures – coffees from a particular region. Whilst tasting, individual tasters detail the aromas and flavours of a coffee and enter them on a proforma. Afterwards proformas are compared and a profile is compiled from the collective palate of the group. Regional taste profiling is an iterative process where numerous coffees from the same region are tasted, and over time, generic characteristics are ascertained and documented. As a result, specific regions have taste profiles that dictate a set of flavours and textures associated with them. Indonesian coffees, for instance are said to be ‘smoky’, ‘peaty’ and ‘earthy’, with a ‘heavy body’ mouth feel. Coffees from individual producers in a region are therefore evaluated based on how their coffee matches up to the regional profile as well as to each other. The tastes of places are ultimately ‘stored’ in the collective body of expert tasters who collaborate to produce socially and affectively imagined geographical knowledges about coffee origins.

The geography of place-making, however, is even more complex. It requires the assemblage and mediation of different bodies in different times and places. In AJ’s industry shorthand, ‘a place should taste right’, and part of her job as a taster for the company is to ‘look for flavours that [she] knows her customers will like…I’m buying for them. If I were buying for myself, we’d only sell like ten kinds of coffee. I always have customers in mind’. Not only should a particular place taste a particular way, but also the taste characteristics of place are defined by experts speculating on how their customers might expect to experience place through coffee. The ingesting body of the consumer is present, albeit mediated by proxy, and as these bodies come together, places are interrogated, evaluated, compared and
ultimately produced. As these geographies are reproduced, and commoditized, they are recycled within the materiality of particular coffee beans.

Monmouth Coffee Company ensures that it has a steady supply of coffees that will appeal to customers’ tastes by establishing long-term contracts with producers. This is partly a strategic response to competition in the industry. AJ comments that ‘the coffee world is not all that big. Everyone knows everyone, and everyone knows what their coffee’s worth’. 

And Additionally, this is partly a response to earlier historic industry practices where short-term contracts, along with dubious social-economic dealings where used to speculate on open commodity exchanges – these practices ultimately prompted, with good cause, the emergence of Fair Trade, and have caused forced those within the industry to rethink their corporate social responsibility (Raynolds, 2002; Raynolds, Murray, & Taylor, 2004). Primarily, however, Monmouth relies on long-term contracts to maintain control over its supply chains and the fashioning of place within its coffees.

For Monmouth, long-term contracts secure access to consistently high-quality coffee that they know (or at least think) they can sell without having to rely on agents and coffee auctions, or having to continually worry about their supplies. These contracts also allow for information exchange between growers and importer/roaster/retailers like Monmouth. Monmouth’s team of tasters and roasters is able to provide feedback on particular crops and the way they taste. Soil nutrients, moisture, and sun/shade – the biophysical properties of place – all impact how coffee tastes after it is roasted. Changes in any one of these can be sensed on the palate and the company, seeking consistent products, must somehow manage this. Monmouth manages dynamics through their relative position of power within their own supply chain. Their roasters can feedback quantitative and qualitative information about coffee – such as how it tastes, how it roasts, and its chemical profiles, all of which are monitored during roasting – to growers who can manipulate their crops by adjusting
agricultural inputs. For instance, ‘adding potassium’, AJ tells me ‘enhances citrus notes’. Alongside the biophysical side of coffee production, where the materiality of place is carefully managed, Monmouth’s roasters are able to detect flaws in coffee’s processing:

Not picking the ripest fruits, allowing it to not dry [and therefore rot] and any number of things that might be okay for lower quality coffee is unacceptable, and we can tell when we roast. Angela will feed these back so that growers can sort themselves out…and we can help so everyone wins. We’re able do this because we have long-term contracts with our growers…though we’ve also ended contracts [for non-compliance].

The way that coffee tastes is partially determined by where it grows and how it was processed. This sensory potential is stored in the bean’s bio-chemical materiality, which is translated socially and discursively as embodied geographical knowledges and imaginations are shared and transferred. Transferring geographical knowledges means translating place. For coffee the relations of place are locked up into its materially, and this materiality undergoes different transformations that variously express its origins.

The rituals of tasting that lead to a regional taste profile and the physical manipulation of growers’ farms and estates are active processes of place making that totalize place into an imperial gaze (Duncan and Ley 1993) and normalize and objectify it into a hegemonic Cartesian discourse. These rituals nod towards a scientific process of tasting that disciplines the complexities and variations of place so that it fits into a generic and categorical regional profile. This process ‘flattens’ the variations that make places unique and agglomerates them into a generic understanding of what a particular place should be like. The disciplining of place is further mediated through the bodies of tasters who have trained themselves to taste places in particular ways. 

As a result, despite the ‘science’ or indeed because of it, place
isemerges as materialized asinto coffee beans both of which become as subjective social constructions that, to barrow-borrow language from actor-network theory (ANT), emerges though not only material, social and discursive assemblage (Thrift 1996) but also through an embodied assemblage that draws elements from other places and other bodies into the ‘network’.

Translating Place

Each material process that coffee beans at Monmouth undergo, including picking, pulping, drying, roasting, grinding, and brewing, is designed to bring place to the palate; AJ goes so far as to suggest that the quality of their product is defined by the ‘way taste is translated down to the customer…from the estates [where coffee is grown] to the shop counter where you can sample what we’re talking about’. For Monmouth Coffee, translating taste means translating place. I’m still in Bermondsey; I’m still talking to AJ and Angela, and we’re tasting coffee in a room adjacent to two roasting machines. Roasting coffee oxidises the chemical compounds of the coffee beans. In this process, different flavours emerge from the raw beans, depending on their biophysical properties, which in the end are dependent on how they’re grown. Roasting at Monmouth, however, is a craft practised by skilled roasters and machine operators who are taught to roast beans in accordance with how those at Monmouth think their customers want to drink and experience place. The roasters mediate between places of production and places of ingestion (see Smith-Maguire 2010), and they fill an important role in translating places of coffee to customers and translating customer imaginations through tasters to growers. Roasters utilize heat and time to highlight and suppress particular elements of coffee’s physical geography and, in the process, translate place by transcribing it onto the bean. These places are mediated by a variety of bodies: expert tasters like AJ who are judging customer demands; expert tasting panels who construct place profiles; (in)expert customers who lead, as well as are led by, the production of these
‘geographies’; and growers who are subjected to the tastes of others, and reproduce coffee and place through their labour.

Monmouth has two roasting machines. One is large to handle the company’s high-volume needs. It is programmable to prescribed settings, like temperature and duration; these settings have been determined by scientific processes of trial and error that have, over time, established a series of roasting profiles to match the regional taste profiles of coffees or, in Angela’s words, ‘the right roast for the right place’. These machines work by forcing hot air through a rotating drum containing the coffee beans. The beans are tested periodically during roasting to ensure that the machine is doing what it is meant to. And, the machine produces a computer-generated readout that records roasting times, temperatures and basic chemical information. These machines are newish to Monmouth, having replaced a set of old flame-roasters, which were considerably more ‘hands-on’ for the roaster. One reason for the investment in the new machines is that the business has grown, and their commercial customers have asked for a more consistent product. Alongside their ability to produce analytical readouts through which roasting profiles can be developed, stored and reused, the computer-programmable roasting machines standardize the variables of roasting—which are coffee quantity, air, heat and time. As such, they have created a method that, as Angela puts it, ‘allows a bunch of non-scientists to be more scientific in standardizing our products’. A peculiar tension has emerged as Monmouth’s business has grown. The company’s discourse stresses the value of individuality within its coffees, and uses place-narratives to differentiate itself from the ‘placeless’ foodscape. Yet in practice, these same places are shaped into homogenous representations of individuality through spatially distant homogenizing processes, such as tasting panels and automated roasters. At the same time, these very same experts recognize that their products are comprised of heterogeneous geographic processes and seek to impart this geography onto their customers.
Buyers like AJ want to offer different flavours to their customers, so they work closely with the roasters to manipulate the roasting process to ‘maximize the experience for the customers’. ‘Roasting is cool because it brings out the flavours that I’ve tasted when at origin…it turns a raw product into something else, but there are parameters…parameters between green and burned’. Roasting also converts raw, green, ‘valueless’ coffee into a commodity, the value of which is created by highlighting its individual characteristics and the ways in which they relate to their places of origin. Roasting coffee is one component of this process. Roasted coffee is graded based on colour: light, medium and dark, and these correspond to time spent in the machine. Darker roasted coffee means that more volatile chemicals have been oxidized and more sugars converted to carbon. This means that dark roasted coffees lose their place-based individuality but gain a generic consistency that (can) hide flaws. Assuming they are not burned away, typical coffee flavours are described as ‘fruit’, ‘citrus’, ‘chocolate’, ‘caramel’, ‘tobacco’, ‘smoked’ with characteristics of ‘elegant’, ‘smooth’, ‘bright’, ‘funky’, or ‘wild’. These are the characteristics that lead to a particular coffee’s profile and what roasters seek to express.

Roasters at Monmouth work at the direction of AJ who, having tasted all coffees on the farm, seeks to impart her own interpretations of place onto her customers. She tells me that ‘typically for a new coffee I have the roasters try a variety of different things…first I ask for a medium and a dark. Then if I want to make changes I’ll ask for more a more medium than medium but less dark than dark, or darker than light but not medium…they usually know what I mean and translate this into something that makes sense’. Yet despite these attempts at consistency, the machines and the profiles, coffee is a natural product (in one way or another) and has variations in its composition. Roasters work with its natural variations and make adjustments to roasting profiles. In Angela’s words, they ‘craft roast coffees to get the best from them,’ imparting their own interpretations of AJ’s demands and their own
interpretations of what they think particular coffees should taste like. AJ tells me that ‘I can tell who in the company’s roasted a coffee, Angela or Jason, or their protégées…and I can certainly tell our coffee from other roasters, even if they’re the same lot of beans from the same place’. As a craft, roasters at Monmouth burn their own ideas of place, standardized by their own scientific practices, into the materiality of the bean. Monmouth’s roasters celebrate other places, but unlike other ‘craftsmen’ (Sennett 2008) the body of the roaster is expected to hide behind the machine.

Monmouth’s roasters strive to maintain the particular place-based characteristics of the coffees that the company sources, but as coffee becomes a commodity, and as place becomes commoditized, maintaining these characteristics becomes one of several priorities. The value of Monmouth’s coffees is in their individuality, but this value can only be realized as individuality is reproduced time and time again. The imagined geographies that are materialized into the coffee bean’s physical properties are shipped across the world to roasters who seek to realize these geographies by physically transforming the coffee bean to match. The roasters, however, receive their instructions from the buyers who have already had a hand in shaping how the places of coffees’ origins can be realized. Roasters strive to reproduce these places, and they report any failures to the buyers who entreat producers to make changes through material manipulations in growing and processing. By the end of roasting, not only has coffee emerged as a commodity, but also the places of coffee, how it should taste, and how place ought to be, are physically burned into the bean. Place is imprinted into the material stuff of coffee through this violent transformation that subjugates place and remakes it in coffee’s geographical image.

**Brewing Place**
It is a twenty-minute walk from Monmouth’s roasterie and warehouse back to their shop in Borough Market. Judging by the traffic it is a twenty-minute drive as well. In the time it takes for roasted coffee to travel from Bermondsey and arrive at the shop in Borough, place has emerged from coffee, ready to sold, bought and ingested. I am back in the queue waiting to buy a new coffee to replace the one lost to Borough Market’s drips, and I’m keen now to buy some beans too. The shop on Park Street is divided into two parts. The left is for customers who only want filter coffees, lattes, espressos, and pastries. In the centre of the room there is a large communal table for sitting. There is also a table near the back that displays pastries. Above this are shelves that display a variety of coffee making implements, filters, grinders, stovetop ‘mocha’ pots – all of which are for sale. This coffee shop does not have the comfortable seating that many international chains advertise. It is no ‘third space’ (Oldenburg 1999) popularized by Howard Schultz, founder of Starbucks. Indeed, Monmouth’s seating is comprised of old wooden school and church chairs as well as slightly wobbly stools on which to perch. Its space is cramped, often hot in the summer, and cold in the winter. This is a place, that according to a voice that wishes to remain anonymous, ‘where you don’t sit and linger. You come in, drink your coffee on a hard wooden chair and fuck-off again…and that’s how [they’ve] designed it. At Monmouth, it’s all about coffee’. An apparatus that facilitates making Monmouth’s ‘signature drink’, a ‘single origin filter coffee’, is located on a counter top next to the till. It comprises a rack that holds the filters, and a shelf below that holds the cups. Behind this countertop, there’s a handwritten chalk sign along the wall. It lists the coffees, and drinks available, as well as prices. Next to the sign is a pictorial ‘commodity chain’, complete with requisite photograph of happy coffee plantation workers, that illustrates various stages of coffee’s production, from planting on the farms, to roasting, and ending with a steaming mug of coffee. Everything Monmouth thinks I need to know about coffee’s geography is right there.
The other side of the shop, where I’m queuing, is dedicated to bean sales, although if they are buying beans, customers may also buy a drink. I’m here to buy beans and to buy a coffee because I’m curious to find out how places are translated to customers before they experience the coffee, and because the queue is much shorter. In front of me are bins of coffee, each with a handwritten origin label. A brass scale, for measuring beans is located directly behind. Even though the queue is shorter, I still have to wait my turn. As I’m waiting, I flip back to the newsletter and read a brief account of a recent trip to origin in Colombia:

Looking out of the window on the flight from Bogota to Neiva we could see that the rainy season had arrived in Colombia. The waters of the Magdalena River were overflowing with muddy water from the rain in the hills above. Arriving in Neiva from Bogota is like getting out a fridge and into a frying pan. It is hot and humid and it is always a relief to get onto the road for the three and a half hour drive to Pitalito. …The group has established its own cupping laboratory…[and] the farmers are learning about their own coffees and how changes in the picking and processing affect the flavour of the final cup. (Tasting Notes provided by Monmouth Coffee Company, July 2008).

By the time I finish reading this, I feel like I’ve been on a trip, and I am surprised to find myself at the front of the queue talking to the barista. I know from the company’s owner and founder, Anita, that the hardest part of the business is:

Transferring all of the stuff we learn [about coffee’s origin, its production, its profiles, etc] as managers to our staff…It’s not just a question of giving [them] a handout…it takes so much more for that information to become absorbed in not just an intellectual
way but to have real knowledge of place…the best way…[to learn]…is by going out
to origin, so all the stuff we tell them [the staff] … you get there and actually see it
happen, every time we take somebody out they say “okay, I understand now”.

I tell the barista behind the counter that I’d like to buy some coffee beans, as well as a filter
coffee, and (taking on coffee lingo) I explain that I’m trying to learn more about coffee and
the ways that origin can be tasted in the cup. Coincidently, she asks if I’ve ever had ‘the
Cooperativa Quebradon, Huila’ from Colombia. I respond, ‘no, but I’ve just been there’. She
laughs and tells me, ‘it’s one of my favourites and works well as filter or in a press pot. Both
bring out its citrus…This one’s bright, lemony chocolate and with nice fruit’. She indicates
towards the tasting notes so that I can read what she has just told me. I also ask for a filter
coffee. The filter coffee is, according to Anita, ‘Monmouth’s signature drink’. It is made by
pouring hot water though ground coffee and through a paper filter fitted to a ceramic cone
suspended above a cup. This is a gentle method for brewing coffee that preserves the volatile
chemicals that comprise coffee’s flavour and links it to its origin. Monmouth brews and sells
filter coffees on the premises, in full view of the customers, and it sells the equipment,
ceramic cones and paper filters, so that its customers can make it at home. Anita tells me that
the filter coffee is the best expression of origin, which is:

What we’re all about…we were the only people that I was aware of that was making a
single cup with a ceramic cone…it’s always been located at the front of the shop so
customers could see it. We didn’t want it relegated to the back…over the years it
became our signature. And now it’s not just coffee. Someone will say I’ll have a
country: A Colombian…imagine that.

At Monmouth, taste and place are preconfigured for customers before they reach the
front of the queue. Monmouth’s filter brewing method is the primary way in which it
translates the places of coffee to customers. Its entire system of taste profiling, signature roasting and the mutually-construed processes that lead to the physical manipulation of coffee’s places of origin ultimately come down to flavours and tastes that are accessible within their ‘signature’ filter coffee. The semiotic devices of the shop, such as the posters, the signage and the ‘field notes’ bracket the experience of drinking the coffees and help to provide a geographical imagination with which customers can develop their own. The filter coffee itself, at least according to those in the company, is the ‘best way to translate coffee’s terroir[s] to the customers’. However, different brewing methods will produce different flavours in a cup of coffee, so Monmouth’s promotion of a single method, along with their provision of the means to make a ‘Monmouth signature’ filter coffee at home, is a way to insure against irregularities. As a measure of quality control, everyone in the company tastes Monmouth’s product in the same way through the filter cup system, ensuring that the same kinds of flavours, and indeed the same kinds of places, are transmitted. The filter coffee is one final mode of standardization for the company. It is one that focuses Monmouth’s entire place-making efforts, all of its imaginative geographies, and all of the customers’ own imaginations and expectations of coffee’s geography into an 8 ounce cup of coffee. It seems that questions that began this journey across South London and beyond have shifted from a concern with which places I am ingesting when I drink my Monmouth coffee, to whose places I am drinking and, finally, to whose palate I am experiencing.

**Conclusion: Drinking the Body-Place**

The very act of ingesting food mobilizes spatially vast, typically invisible, geographical relationships. That these relationships fashion place is one thing. That these relationships dictate to place how they are meant to be fashioned is another. And that these relations then dictate the fashioning of places through the body suggests a kind of consumptive bio-power where bodies are variously mobilized and disciplined to fit into a geographical imaginary.
Many of the foodstuffs we eat and drink are not only produced somewhere else by others, but are also the product of multiple spatio-temporal relations. Up until the point at which coffee is ready to be sipped, glugged, or otherwise ‘thrown down’, its places, bodies, geographies and commodifications, alongside the ways in which these all fold into some type of topology, form a story of geographical potential. The moment that coffee passes the lips, these are all realized; they are ingested and become part of the drinker’s body. And, since coffee is mediated by a constellation of bodies, to drink coffee is to drink a lot of bodies.

Watts (2004), when examining the differences between one type of agrarian meat production and another (chickens and pigs), queries whether the biology of a commodity makes ‘a damn bit of difference’ (ibid. ref.). He suggests that all commodity systems rely on processes of displacement and distancing to make their constitution palatable. I argue, instead, that biology does make a difference, because eating – the visceral reproduction of the body and its biology – is constituted by geographies of embodiment. Ingesting food is profoundly intimate and profoundly local. It signifies a moment when the objective outside becomes the subjective inside, and all of the things that go along with food, such as tastes, feelings, affects, materialities and socialities are realized within the body. This biological intimacy is what differentiates food from (most) other objects and other commodities because its value is at least partially dependent on what happens to it when it enters the body, and also, the bodies of others. To eat a food is to eat its geography but for coffee this is more complex; coffee is traded based on how it tastes and, although this is dependent on its places of origin, how it tastes also depends on tasters themselves and their embodied ability to communicate their own experiences when tasting. The experience of ingesting is thereby shared, sought out, and otherwise commoditized to be reproduced. The story of, particularly specialist, coffee, such as that sold by Monmouth, is therefore one of bodies, as well as places, on the move. Yet attention to these bodies is largely missing in discussions of a foodstuff that celebrates its
places of origin to its consumers and imbibers. In this chapter I have suggested that this biology matters because its geography matters, and its geographies matter because its biologies matter.
REFERENCES


