

Commodification of Otherness in Fair Trade Marketing

Sasha Scott  
Spring 2011  
School of International Service  
International Studies  
General University Honors  
Professor Celine-Marie Pascale

## **Abstract**

In recent years, fair trade products have made the leap from alternative markets into mainstream distribution channels. As fair trade products become more widely available, their marketing practices warrant further critique. The movement portrays its products as fundamentally altering the relationship between producers and consumers. In this study, I conducted a semiotic analysis of the websites and packages for Alter Eco, Equal Exchange, and Whole Trade products. My research demonstrates how the discourses found in these materials obscure the structural inequalities that invite the idea of fair trade in the first place. In addition, it demonstrates how the textual construction of “fair trade” commodifies individual people and produces a collective otherness. I argue that ultimately, these discourses reinforce existent power dynamics between producers and consumers. Further, I consider the implications of marked and unmarked categories in reproducing hegemonic relations of power and privilege, and suggest ways to enhance fairness through counterhegemonic discursive practices.

## **Introduction**

When you choose a bag of coffee or a bar of chocolate at the grocery store, you don't often think about the people who planted, tended and picked the coffee or cacao beans. Indeed shoppers seem to be unaware that the producers of food products earn only a small proportion of the money you spend on it at the store. For example, as the price for raw beans declines, it is no longer enough to sustain families or provide for basic rights like education and health. At the same time, corporations that buy and sell produce are reporting record profits. The fair trade movement has developed as an alternative to this exploitative system (Waridel 2002).

Fair trade is a market-based approach to improving the lives of producers in developing countries through better trade policies. The idea is that distributors develop relationships directly with producers, pay them a fair price for their product, get that process certified by a third party, and then sell the product to consumers. Fair trade products have recently made the leap from alternative markets into mainstream markets. Because the producers receive a living wage, the product is often more expensive than the conventionally traded alternative. Marketing techniques must advertise the difference between fair trade and conventional trade in order to command a higher price for their good. As fair trade products become more widely available, their marketing practices warrant further critique.

## **Literature Review**

Research on the discourses surrounding fair trade is defined by two major debates. One is between scholars who believe that the language used to talk about fair trade reveals the social relation of production and scholars who believe that the language used obscures that relationship. Both implicitly and explicitly, the center of these debates is Marx's concept of commodity fetishism. Marx coined the phrase commodity fetishism to name the idea of obscuring the social relation of production. It is because of the process of fetishization that when a consumer picks up a product, they think only about the item itself and not about the process through which that item came to be or the people involved in that process. Commodification is the process by which a good becomes a commodity, or a product that is functionally the same no matter who produces it. Commodification and the fetishization of commodities go hand in hand in the current capitalist economic system, since practically all commodities are fetishized. So, when scholars refer to the process of commodification, many times they are including the process of fetishization in the concept.

Some scholars portray the fair trade movement as an attempt to counter commodity fetishism. Hudson and Hudson (2003) maintain that talking about the production process involved in making fair trade goods reveals the producers and the production process to the consumers and therefore counteracts fetishism of the product. Similarly, Goodman (2004) asserts that the signs used in the semiotic production of fair trade commodities re-connect producers and consumers. The consumer can no longer think of the product as only an object for their use. Instead, they are made aware of the

people involved in its production, which changes their relationship to the product and the producer.

Alternatively, many scholars argue that the language used to market fair trade products obscures the relationship between the consumer and the producer. For example, Fridell (2007) asserts that although fair trade businesses present themselves as a challenge to commodity fetishism, because of their place within the market economy, they ultimately commodify the very idea of decommodification. In addition, Johnston (2002) focuses on the discourse of choice, arguing that it obscures the unequal power differentials between producers and consumers.

Within this debate is a subset of arguments by scholars who still see the current discourse on fair trade as a step toward reducing global inequity, while others see it as reinforcing the existing unequal power dynamic between producers and consumers and discouraging attempts at systematic change. The second major set of debates is rooted to this analysis and explores whether the language used to sell fair trade products politicizes or depoliticizes consumers.

Goodman (2004) asserts that the language used in fair trade marketing politicizes consumption and consumers. Fisher (2007) notes that fair trade commodifies activism, but argues that the *effects* of that commodification are potentially political. While acknowledging that the focus on relationships disguises inequalities, Fisher is hopeful, stating that we can think of fair trade as “creeping activism and social awareness” rather than “creeping alienation” (2007:86). Fisher seems to think fair trade is a step in the right direction. By contrast, Low and Davenport (2005) argue that as fair trade products are

increasingly sold through mainstream distribution channels, the aspects of activism and social justice are being lost along the way. The message has been diluted from advocating for global trade reform to “shopping for a better world”(495).

Doane (2010) and Newhouse (2011) take critiques of fair trade discourse farther than Low and Davenport, by arguing that the language of the fair trade movement individualizes the call for change. For example, Doane argues that consumers “gain a sense of agency and efficacy through the market”(2010:230), effectively obfuscating the social relation of production and refetishizing the fair trade commodity. She notes that producers are more likely to think structurally about the fair trade system than are consumers.

Similarly, Newhouse (2011) argues that this individualizing language actively discourages more organized confrontation of the structural roots of inequality. She makes it clear that the depoliticized narratives of poverty that she found in fair trade materials obscure the structural violence that leads to that poverty. Both of these arguments develop Johnston’s claim (2002) that the absence of reference to discourses of politics, economics, capitalism, or democracy leads the consumer to believe that there is no need to question the government, corporations, or indeed the consumer’s own role in the system of unfair trade that has necessitated the fair trade movement.

M’Closkey (2010) examined the marketing practices of the fair trade network from a different angle. She uses the specific case of Novica selling Navajo patterns made by Zapotec weavers to show that some fair trade organizations are abandoning the fair trade principle of social justice. M’Closkey points out that the fair trade network does not

challenge neoliberalism, but is actually compatible with it. The knock-off patterns that she analyzes are an example of how fair trade organizations “capitulate to... capitalism’s mandate” (275) to behave in an exploitative and destructive fashion to increase competitive advantage.

Other scholars have written about the numerous problematic ways in which producers have been constructed in fair trade advertising materials. Varul (2008) argues that the discourse of fair trade has not moved far enough from the old discourse of charity. Fair trade discourse commodifies the producer and brings back the colonial legacy. The producers are constructed as bearers of cultural authenticity through images and text in advertisements. Doane (2010) similarly argues that Native American artisans are constructed as “cultural performers,” not “workers,” whereby their culture is commoditized. Johnston (2002) notes that the consumption of “exotic” goods is a neocolonial act that draws on a long western tradition of Orientalism.

Not enough research has been done connecting these problematic constructions of the producers to the commodity fetishism that is denied and reproduced in fair trade discourse. I will build on Varul and Doane’s studies of how producers are exoticized and commodified in fair trade marketing and connect this to the construction of fair trade consumption as a moral endeavor (Fisher 2007, Low and Davenport 2005). I will use this connection to add evidence to the argument that the language in use reinforces existing unequal power dynamics, making fair trade consumption ultimately a neocolonial act (Johnston 2002).

## **Methods**

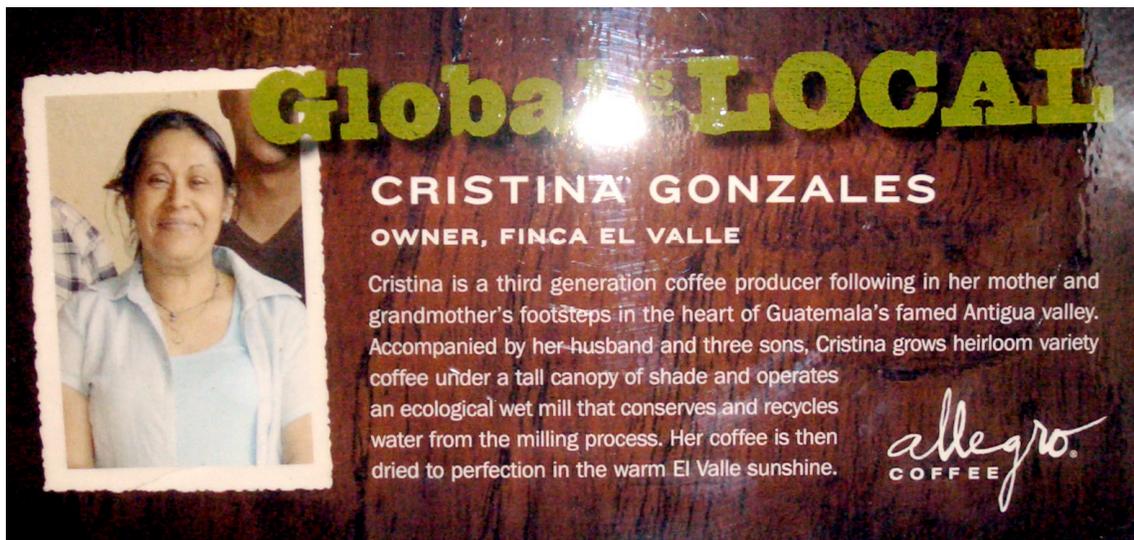
My data set is composed of advertising materials from three fair trade businesses: Equal Exchange, Alter Eco, and Whole Trade. I chose these three companies because they are different types of fair trade businesses. Equal Exchange is a worker-owned cooperative based in Massachusetts. They buy their products from co-operatives of small-scale farmers. They say they are working for a “more equitable, democratic, and sustainable world.” Alter Eco is a for-profit company. According to their website, they aim to “gradually close the gap between the rich and the poor.” Whole Foods launched its own certification process, called the Whole Trade Guarantee. They bill it as a “purchasing initiative emphasizing ethics and social responsibility.” All three claim to be offering better wages and protecting the environment. In addition, the marketing practices of these three companies are representative of larger industry trends, whereby producers are constructed as the exotic other in need of help that the consumer can provide through the purchase of fair trade products.

I conducted a semiotic analysis of advertising materials used by these companies to examine their claims about equality and fairness. My analysis examines the process of signification to explore how the symbolic value of fair trade is constructed. The symbolic value of products drives consumers to spend more for ordinary items. Consider that a Nike Swoosh on a pair of sneakers can increase their retail value more than five times. For shoppers in a grocery store, the symbolic value of “fair trade” —although quite different from the symbolic of the Nike swoosh—has a similar effect on retail value. Yet the fair trade movement claims to be creating fundamental change is the relationship

between producers and consumers. I investigated these claims, analyzing how the language and images used in marketing materials construct producers, consumers, and the relationship between them. This project does not attempt to make any claims about the change or lack thereof that fair trade might bring to the day-to-day lives of producers. Rather, it centers on the role of language in producing the meaning and value of particular kinds of shopping.

### **Speaking the Language of Fair Trade**

The language used in Whole Trade, Equal Exchange, and Alter Eco marketing materials constructs two dialogic discourses. First, it constructs an exotic and romanticized image of producers, commodifies their (purportedly static) culture, and places them in a bucolic setting, in tune with nature. The following exemplars are representative of this discourse.



**Figure 1** Picture from wall display advertising Whole Trade coffee in a Whole Foods grocery store. The heading reads “Global is our Local.”

The phrases “third generation,” “following in her mother and grandmother’s footsteps,” “accompanied by her husband and three sons,” and “heirloom variety,” point to ideas of tradition and community that have historically been associated with indigenous groups. The language conjures up images of a romantic, bucolic setting with the phrases “in the heart of Guatemala’s famed Antigua valley,” “a tall canopy of shade,” and “the warm El Valle sunshine.” Another concept frequently associated with indigeneity is the idea of being in tune with nature, and we find that here not only in the references to the geographical setting, but also in the idea of “an ecological wet mill that conserves and recycles water.”

The combined effect is an exotic image of indigenous people, growing coffee in harmony with the land, in a process imbued with tradition and with the involvement of community. This discourse obscures the fact that the colonial introduction of coffee as a cash crop fundamentally altered the relationship of indigenous people to the land, since they were no longer allowed to be subsistence farmers. Instead they were integrated into the global capitalist system in an exploitative fashion, growing luxury goods for consumption in the colonizing state. The colonial legacy of coffee production that is obscured is also tied to the colonial legacy of the way the other is portrayed.

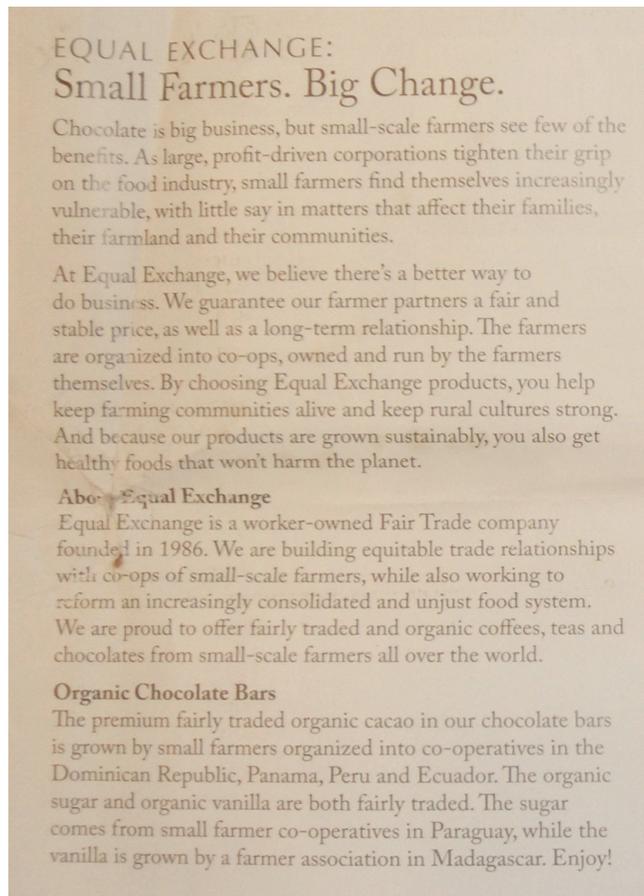
The choice of a brown-skinned person with a foreign name that is easily recognizable as other is a common trend across the data. Naming the country adds to the sense of the foreign and exotic. A booklet on Whole Trade that is made to look like a passport adds to the exotification of the producers, saying:

Whole Trade products are your passport to exploring the world at its most delicious, exotic and beautiful while empowering hard-working farmers, artisans and entrepreneurs in developing countries. No need to pack your bags—we do the legwork, traveling the globe and bringing these incredible discoveries to our aisles for you to explore. (“Explore the World” 2010:2)

While many fair trade companies talk about bridging the gap between producers and consumers, the language they use actually reinforces the distance between them. In the process of emphasizing the spatial distance, they also construct producers as foreign and exotic, commodifying this difference for consumption. At the top of the Alter Eco wrapper (Figure 3), the text names the country “Bolivia,” and also uses the phrase “indigenous Andeans,” once again conjuring the image of a foreign and exotic indigenous group. “Ancient ingredients” points to the idea of a static culture and tradition.

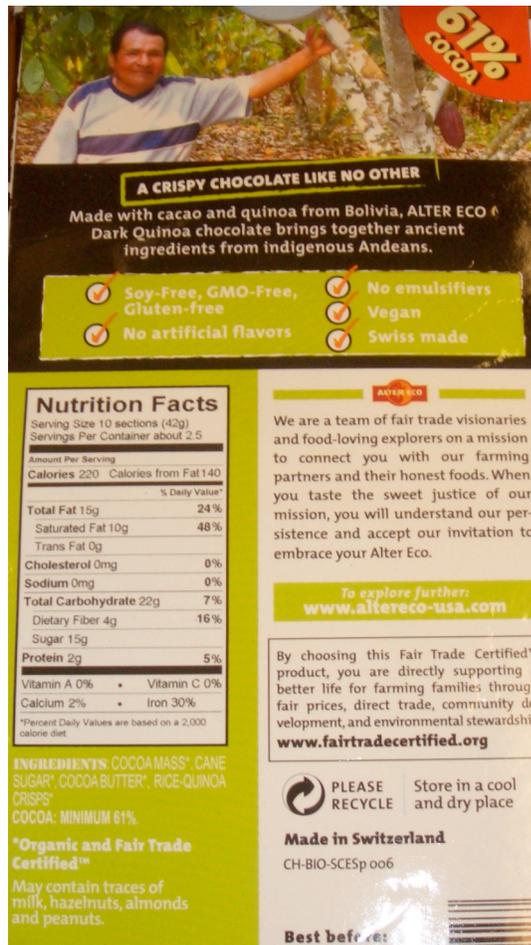
In Equal Exchange’s advertising (Figure 2), the producer’s culture is constructed as static or primordial with the phrase “keep rural cultures strong.” We also see the producer constructed as living in harmony with nature in the sentence “because our products are grown sustainably, you also get healthy food that won’t harm the planet.” The language also constructs producers as in need of help and consumers as capable of giving help. With the phrase “small farmers find themselves increasingly vulnerable, with little to say in matters that affect their families, their farmland, and their communities,” producers are robbed of agency.

The second discourse concerns consumers. Marketing materials construct consumers as moral persons with the agency to improve the world through the products they purchase. In this discourse, the consumer is given responsibility for the well being of the producer, thus reinforcing hegemonic power dynamics. The discourse of choice gives



**Figure 2** The inside of a wrapper of an Equal Exchange chocolate bar.

a sense of agency to the consumer, and the idea of “directly supporting a better life for farming families” (Figure 3) takes the power over their own lives away from producers. This power is given to consumers with the phrase “you help keep farming communities alive” (Figure 2). This language recreates the existing unequal power dynamic and maintains dependency, rather than creating empowerment.



**Figure 3** The back of an Alter Eco chocolate wrapper.

The construction of fair trade consumption as a moral endeavor is reminiscent of the colonial discourse of the moral imperative of helping colonial subjects. The language in the Whole Trade pamphlet evokes a colonial past. The phrase “no need to pack your bags, we do the legwork for you,” (“Explore the World” 2010:2) conjures the image of a colonial subject as a servant. The consumer/colonizer has money to spare, and the producer/subject is in need of income, so the consumer is obligated to buy fair trade,

ensuring a living wage, just as the colonizer was obligated to employ the subject as a servant. Thus, in the pursuit of equality, the consumer's status is elevated.

## **Discussion**

In arguing that Whole Trade, Equal Exchange, and Alter Eco's marketing materials construct producers as the exotic other, I have added evidence to previous claims made by Varul (2008) and Doane (2010), among others. I have made the connection between this exotification and the moral consumption that Low and Davenport (2005) and Fisher (2007) point out. The language of fair trade marketing constructs the symbolic value that consumers pay extra for when they buy fair trade. That symbolic value is the idea that they are moral people with the ability to help the exotic other. This symbolic value reproduces the hegemonic power structure in a neocolonial fashion.

It is important to reiterate that I am not making a claim about the change that the fair trade movement may or may not make in the everyday lives of producers by providing a living wage. I am arguing that in addition to whatever material effect fair trade has, it also does this harm by symbolically reinforcing the unequal power differential. It is entirely possible for these two seemingly contradictory realities to coexist.

Recognizing the limitations for creating change within the market system, as it exists, it is useful to suggest counterhegemonic discursive practices with the potential to enhance fairness. First, we must acknowledge that fair trade goods are still commodified,

because the person on the package did not actually produce this exact product. Rather, they are an abstraction of an idea; they stand for a group of people like them. Still, the possibility exists to return some agency to the producers.

The main way that producers can take back their power over their own story is by telling it in their own words. If the goal is to actually break down barriers between producers and consumers, then the fair trade companies should let producers tell their story from a perspective where they have agency. Instead of talking about the company giving the producers better wages, the packaging might tell of how the producers organized to form a cooperative to demand better wages. The resulting image would be less exotic, but it would be closer to the social justice principles that the fair trade movement espouses.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Professor Pascale: it is because you believed in my ability to do this and do it well that I kept going and did not give up. I would also like to thank Robbie Cavooris, for his patience and willingness to listen to my ideas. And to my mom, Kathy Scott, thank you for your excitement about my project and help with my data collection.

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