Consuming narratives: the political ecology of 'alternative' consumption

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This paper examines how political ecology themes of tropical conservation and social justice become representational practices underpinning 'alternative' consumption in the North. The notion of commodity culture is adopted to understand the ambiguous rationalities and ethical assumptions of two sets of consumption practices. The first case considers Edenic myth-making used to assimilate concerns over tropical deforestation in the South to consumption-intensive if conservation-minded lifestyles in the North. The second case looks at fair trade and how concern about social injustice and unfair labour practices in the South is harnessed to solidarity-seeking consumption constitutive of 'radical' lifestyles. The paper suggests these contrasting commodity cultures broadly conform to divergent positions in red–green debates. It argues that both are weakened as a form of social and political 'caring at a distance' due to an uncritical acceptance of consumption as the primary basis of action.

key words political ecology consumption fair trade Edenic myths commodity culture

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> The nature of consumption at this precarious moment needs to be re-cognized . . . in such a manner that its inseparability from nature becomes every bit as explicit as its deep entanglement with politics, the economy and culture. (Pred 1998, 151)

Introduction

As consumption becomes the 'new' activism, political ecology narratives are increasingly shaping how 'alternative' consumption is understood in the developed world. In an era of pervasive commodification and perceived environment and development 'crises', the deployment of themes to do with the latter in order to intensify the former is predictable. That environmental conservation and social justice are frequently identified as morally beneficial objectives only adds to the attraction of refracting consumption through these political-ecology lenses. In a world where the perceived need for action is matched by the quiescence of political and economic leaders, consumption is a way in which individuals seek to 'make a difference'. The consuming body thus becomes the frontline as everyday acts – eating, bathing, shopping or dressing, for example – are politicized.

This paper assesses how alternative consumption practices are defined in particular ways using political ecology narratives. Drawing on selected debates in political ecology and consumption studies, it uses the notion of 'commodity culture' to understand the rationalities and assumptions that are embedded in the representational practices surrounding green consumption (based on Edenic myth-making) and fair trade. In the case of fair trade, we speak of a 'solidarity-seeking' commodity culture in order to emphasize the distinctive focus on social justice through fair labour and exchange practices. For the case of green consumption, we refer to a 'conservation-seeking' commodity culture so as to stress a 'consuming' concern linked to environmental sensibilities. There are substantial differences between these two commodity cultures mirroring wider divisions – ecocentrism versus anthropocentrism and red versus

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green, for instance (Pepper 1993; Dobson 2000; Carter 2001; Miller 2001a). Yet, nonetheless, the two share a consumption-centred political strategy. Here, what is at stake is not simply 'the commodification of various kinds of cultural difference' (Jackson 1999, 96). Instead, 'resistance' itself is commodified insofar as protest over perceived environmental degradation or social injustice is expressed through the strategic manipulation of consumption practices and exchange relations. It is suggested, though, that this might leave these practices subject to challenge due to an uncritical acceptance of consumption as a core strategy.

We use these two commodity cultures as a means to reflect generally on the place of political ecology narratives in consumption processes. There are several reasons for this focus. First, it enables us to draw attention to the important but poorly understood role of *consumption* in political ecology. Much research in this field is focused on assessing economic production or interrogating political and discursive articulations of development (Blaikie 1999; Watts 2000; Bryant 2001; Peet and Watts 2004). Second, our focus on commodity cultures in the North that are *about* the South helps us to break free from entrenched North/South dichotomies that still bedevil political ecology, albeit less so than in the past (Bebbington and Batterbury 2001; McCarthy 2002; Walker 2003; see also Larner and LeHeron 2002). Finally, the stress on *political ecology* narratives allows us to assess an increasingly significant set of representational practices in relation to 'alternative' forms of consumption in the North that seem notably to have direct and substantial effects on people and environments in the South.

In short, we hope to open up interesting spaces for novel dialogue between consumption studies, work on material cultures and political ecology, as well as for future work on 'alternative' commodity cultures. With this agenda-setting nature of the paper in mind, we want to make two points of clarification. First, to some, our conceptual methodology may seem counter to some recent work in the material cultures of consumption on shopping behaviour, identity formation and the creation of difference (e.g. Miller *et al.* 1998; Cook *et al.* 1999; Valentine 1999; Miller 2001a; Williams *et al.* 2001; Lockie *et al.* 2002; Shaw and Newholm 2002; Crewe 2003; Dwyer and Jackson 2003; Weatherell *et al.* 2003). However, we would argue that it is important to maintain a continuing engagement with the representational politics of commoditization and associated links to consumers [what in a less-politicized context Mansfield (2003a 2003b) calls the 'material culture of commodity production']. Our emphasis is thus methodologically parallel to the literature on material cultures of consumption even as it promises to enrich that sort of ethnographic work on commodities and consumers (cf. Miller 2001b; Slater 2003). Moreover, we see our work on the commoditization of 'alternative' commodity cultures as crucial in elaborating the neglected connections between consumption studies and the political ecology of globally uneven development. Indeed, the rapid rise of niche and alternative commodity production is pushing a growing number of poor Southern producers to the foreground in a process that positively cries out for sustained analysis.

Second, while we deploy generalized notions of 'North' and 'South' (and to some extent also the 'tropics') to describe our case study commodity cultures, this should be viewed as simply a shorthand to describe more complex patterns of production and consumption shaping alternative commodity cultures rather than a reification of these categories. Indeed, and described in more detail below, fair trade commodities often make detailed connections to particular places of production in the South that typically mimic trade patterns and their discursive imaginaries established during colonial times (e.g. North American imports of coffee from Central and South America; European imports of various products from the Caribbean and parts of West Africa) (Goodman 2004).[1]

The paper thus proceeds as follows. After a selective overview of political ecology, we frame the notions of conservation-seeking and solidarity-seeking commodity cultures against the backdrop of a discussion of work on consumption, commodity cultures and moral geography. The paper then explores the case of green consumption in relation to a conservation-seeking commodity culture that is based on Edenic myth-making. In contrast, the second case examines issues of fair trade and social justice that are linked to a solidarity-seeking commodity culture. We conclude by assessing the possible aspects to and benefits of the linkage of political ecology and consumption studies via a research agenda oriented around a political ecology of commodity cultures.

Conservation, social justice and political ecology

The attractiveness of political ecology to 'alternative' consumption discourses and dynamics is

based in the analytical and methodological evolution of the research field. Specifically, a particular line of questioning has characterized political ecology, influencing in turn its discursive appeal in the domain of alternative consumption. Thus, it is asked, why is the South seemingly perennially plagued by social and environmental 'crisis'? Why is it that the poor are typically the primary victims of perceived crises of soil erosion, flooding, deforestation or urban pollution? What are the key connections between socio-political processes, representational practices and environmental change in the South?

These questions prompted a growing body of research in the 1970s and 1980s that came to be known as political ecology. Scholars inspired notably by the work of Butzer, Blaikie, Brookfield, Turner and Watts assessed the deepening human grip on biophysical processes. In doing so, they sought to understand the social, political and ecological implications of this epochal transformation for peoples and ecologies, past and present, in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Watts 1983; Blaikie 1985; Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Turner II *et al.* 1990).

For many, the focus on 'regional political ecology' (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987) at that time only became meaningful when allied to a neo-Marxist agenda for change. As a result, analyses followed concerns about social justice drawn from Marxist work on uneven geographical development, modes of production and under-development (Harvey 1982; Corbridge 1986; Peet 1998). There were three main elements to this effort.

First, there was the preoccupation with a global capitalist system seen to be the cause of most of the world's troubles. Conditions of social and economic inequality, political and cultural oppression, economic exploitation, and natural resource depletion were linked to capitalism. A well-known text of the 1980s on soil erosion is a case in point. Blaikie (1985) explored the social and ecological complexities of soil erosion ignored in conventional accounts to show how capitalist agrarian production was instrumental in 'mining' soils. While careful to acknowledge non-economic influences, Blaikie (1985, 147) concluded that soil erosion would not be substantially reduced 'unless it seriously threatens the accumulation possibilities of the dominant classes'.

Second, there was a description of the structural subordination of the South. Drawing notably on Frank, scholars related social 'underdevelopment' to resource extraction and environmental degradation. Thus, Bunker (1985) related dependency analysis to ideas about energy flow to explain Amazonian conditions. Readers were introduced to an Amazonian hinterland being drained of energy as forests were felled and local livelihoods disrupted in aid of metropolitan areas of southern Brazil and the North.

Finally, there was emphasis on class inequities as the oppression of farmers was linked to the practices of landlords who were enmeshed in subordinate relations with capitalists based in distant capitals in Europe and North America. Thus, O'Brien's (1985) account of the political economy of agrarian production in the Sudan links famine to the expansion of export-oriented cotton and sorghum production since the 1960s. Patterns of 'articulated' and 'disarticulated accumulation' flourished at the behest of 'the hegemonic agrarian fraction of the bourgeoisie' located in the Sudan (O'Brien 1985, 30).

These scholars, who were joined by the likes of O'Keefe, Wisner, Hecht and Watts, sought a neo-Marxist 'progressive contextualization' (or the move from local social and biophysical changes to national and global social causation; see Vayda 1983) of Southern environmental issues. The strength of this approach was seen to be twofold. It let scholars make sense of the power of 'non-place-based' forces over 'place-based' activities. By combining an anthropological understanding of localities with neo-Marxism's structural take on class and dependency relations, writers promoted a decidedly political approach to the understanding of environment and development issues. Neo-Marxist political ecology thus reflected a perceived need to develop radical analyses which would not only *explain* Southern poverty, but which would also seek to *change* it. The outcome could, at times, be what Blaikie (1985, 154) called 'practical pessimism'. Yet, the need was there for a 'radical revaluation of both nature and community' in order to promote non-exploitative North/South relations (Bunker 1985, 254; see also Peet 1998).

One key assumption guided this work – to understand uneven geographical development there was a need to focus on the dynamics of agrarian *production* as millions of peasants experienced commoditization under capitalism (cf. Watts 1983 on Nigeria). This focus emerged from a concern for the plight of the poor of the South, many of whom

then lived in rural areas. The focus also matched a Marxist tradition of privileging production over distribution and consumption (Taylor 1979; Harvey 1982).

However, criticism of neo-Marxist political ecology grew in the late 1980s as part of a wider critique of the 'impasse' in neo-Marxism (Booth 1994). The field was seen to be narrow and structural, and thereby incapable of understanding complex political, economic or cultural processes. Post-Marxist theories (e.g. Foucauldian, feminist) filled the void left by neo-Marxism's decline. The result was a post-Marxist political ecology that was both contingent and fragmented in nature. Cultural and political questions predominated as a move away from 'grand' theorizing gained momentum (Escobar 1996; Peet and Watts 1996b; Rocheleau *et al.* 1996; Bryant and Bailey 1997; Neumann 1998).

A complex intellectual terrain was thus opened up. We note here simply two things about this shift (for more details, see Blaikie 1999; Watts 2000; Bryant 2001). First, one result of the stress on the role of politics in political ecology is that studies examine diverse facets of state behaviour including bureaucratic politics and discursive articulations of policy practice (Peluso 1992; Bryant 1997; Neumann 1998; Gauld 2000; Rangan 2000; LeBillon 2001). The discursive 'turn' has been particularly noteworthy because it has shown the connection between the political framing of environmental issues and diverse material outcomes (Crush 1995; Escobar 1996; Peet and Watts 1996b; Castree and Braun 1998; Blaikie 1999 2000; Adger *et al.* 2001; Castree 2001b). Environmental conservation has been a recurrent focus here, since it neatly highlights ambiguous state conduct (Katz 1998; McAfee 1999; Bryant 2002; Campbell 2002; Castree 2003; Kull 2004). It also illuminates questions of social injustice insofar as conservation is predicated on a 'tragedy of enclosure' (*The Ecologist* 1993; Goldman 1998), whereby the poor are denied access to land and water as the flipside of conserving biological diversity.

Second, and notwithstanding a 'politics first' strand, research that continues to be inspired by Marxist and non-Marxist influences is still involved in the exploration of agrarian production (e.g. Pred and Watts 1992; Zimmerer 1996; Schroeder 1999; Chatterjee 2001; Peet and Watts 2004). Noteworthy here is a focus on new conditions of production and 'flexible' labour associated with contract farming as novel forms of accumulation are essayed (Little and Watts 1994; Goodman and Watts 1994; Grossman 1998; Striffler 2002). Such work evinces an ongoing commitment to study uneven geographical development and to remain focused on questions of social injustice. In this way, concerns about environmental conservation and social (in)justice have been central to the elaboration of political ecology as a research field that seeks to render legible the contours of a politicized environment (Bryant and Bailey 1997).

We do not take issue with these valuable contributions. What concerns us, though, is what tends to be thereby neglected. For one thing, these concerns remain largely focused on practices in the South. True, notions of 'progressive contextualization' (Vayda 1983) and the 'chain of explanation' (Blaikie 1995) seem to invite attention to non-Southern causality. Yet there is surprisingly little effort in practice devoted to assessing how social processes integral to the North may affect Southern political ecologies through a variety of geographical pathways. For another thing, there is a relative neglect of consumption as production remains to the fore. In contrast, this paper addresses the question of consumption (indeed 'alternative' consumption). It does so by assessing particular consumption dynamics in the North (with particular reference to North America and the UK) insofar as they relate to political ecology themes about the South (with reference to both forested and agrarian settings). To do so, however, requires us to consider the matter of commodity cultures as well as associated ethical concerns that have featured in the North.

Alternative consumption via 'solidarity' and 'conservation' commodity cultures

One look at the shelves of many Northern supermarkets – and certainly in North America and the UK, our main Northern geographical focus here – leads to a recognition that consumption is taking on important new meanings. Sales of 'alternative' commodities have grown even as Crewe (2001, 631) observes '[t]he act of consumption is being invested with increasingly political overtones'. Typified by 'fairly' or 'ethically' traded and 'organically' grown products, many commodities are produced in the South – purportedly under environmentally and socially conscious conditions – for consumption in the North. And, unlike the 'silent' grapes Harvey (1990) describes that cannot

'tell' anything about the relations that went into their production, these alternative commodities veritably shout to consumers about the socio-natural relations under which they were produced through carefully wrought images and texts. But, as will become clear, these commodities 'speak' to consumers in particular ways through specific political ecology narratives, notably invoking 'fecund' tropical natures and hard-working Southern producers. Via alternative commodities, consumption practices may be seen to acquire meaning for the politics of production – not least in the connection between perceived moral content and the 'progressive development' of diverse political ecologies in the South.

Yet, how do we understand these discourses and the processes by which they are propagated through alternative consumption in the North? For us, it is important to draw on contributions to a 'material cultural geography' (Cook and Crang 1996) that explore the geographies of consumption and its multiple locations and meanings in the construction of contemporary social life.[2] To this end, and in a move that goes beyond the study of consumption per se, Jackson (1999 2002b; see also Crang *et al.* 2003) offers a 'commodity cultures' approach to understanding the processes of commoditization and the socio-material life of commodities. This approach attempts to encapsulate the interplay of production and consumption as well as the meanings and materialities of commodities within one analytical frame. Jackson suggests that this

> involves a move from linear commodity chains to more complex circuits and networks as a way to subverting dualistic thinking and unsettling the kind of linear logic that sees consumption at one end of a chain that begins with equally abstracted notion [*sic*] of production. This emphasis on networks and circuits is not designed to demonstrate complexity for its own sake but to suggest new modes of understanding and new possibilities for intervention in what can sometimes seem an all-encompassing 'consumer culture' where every act of resistance is immediately recuperated by the market in successive rounds of commodification. (Jackson 2002b, 5)[3]

This framework is operationalized in two main ways. First, a commodity cultures frame assesses how meanings are imbued in commodities but also how those meanings are involved in the production of cultural difference at the point of consumption 'without simply "reading off" symbolic meaning from the mode of production' (Jackson 2002b, 13; see also Arce and Marsden 1993). Cook and Crang (1996) characterize this approach as 'working on' or 'roughing up' the 'surfaces' of commodities such that the focus is on the negotiated interface between consumers and the 'social life' of the commodity (Appadurai 1986). Second, Jackson and others (e.g. Leslie and Reimer 1999) suggest the need for critical analytical space by focusing on the relations of power in the material and discursive production of commodities and their regimes of exploitation. This focus is underlain by a neo-Marxian view of how commoditization works – that commodities contain a double fetish 'that both obscures realities at the sites of production *and* creates cultural and economic surpluses for consumers' (Hughes 2000, 179; also Cook and Crang 1996; Castree 2001a). We feel this framework is useful for understanding 'alternative' commodities and associated processes of commoditization that obscure 'awkward' political and ecological dynamics in the South. It also provides a way to understand how 'progressive' relationships within solidarity-seeking commodity cultures are 'revealed'.

As a part of the attempt to integrate cultural and economic inquiry (Crang 1997; Jackson 1999 2002b; Barnes 2001; Sayer 2001; Warde 2002; Whatmore 2002), a commodity cultures approach reflects a broad linkage of the concepts and concerns of cultural studies and political economy.[4] As Crewe notes, this framing enjoys a particularly critical approach to the

> . . . tracing [of] the movement of commodities through particular circuits of culture, and offer[s] more culturally nuanced insights into the meanings of goods as they pass through different places and phases of commodity circulation. (Crewe 2001, 632)

The analyst remains 'at play in the fields' of cultural difference and meaning without shirking the duties of a critical geographical materialism. With its liminal and boundary-crossing characteristics, the study of food is central to this post-structural-inflected political economy (Cook and Crang 1996; Cook *et al.* 1999 2000; Guthman 2002 2003; Mansfield 2003b; also papers in Freidberg 2003c). The use of these analytical tools has also begun to figure prominently in debates in agrofood studies (Lockie and Kitto 2000; Goodman and DuPuis 2002; also papers in Goodman 2002 2003). This is so because, as Crewe puts it,

> what is becoming clear is that we need to more fully theorize the relationships between practices associated with the provision of food and the consumption of that food. (2001, 603)

Relating this research to a post-structural-inflected political ecology suggests the need to investigate the relationship between 'green' development and its political ecology narratives, as well as associated forms of 'alternative' consumption.

Of particular interest here is the concern with the construction and flow of geographic knowledge within commodity cultures and networks (Cook and Crang 1996; Hughes 2000). These forms of knowledge involve the construction of spaces, places and biophysical environments as they inhabit and move along commodity networks. In their work on 'ethnic' foods, for instance, Cook and Crang note that

> foods do not simply come from places, organically growing out of them, but also make places as symbolic constructs, being deployed in the discursive constructions of various imaginative geographies. (1996, 140)

Similarly, Hughes (2000) addresses the role of knowledge – simultaneously social, technical and aesthetic – in driving the cut flower trade and mediating between actors in this network, be they retailers in the UK or producers in Kenya. The circulation of knowledge about flowers (including production, flower arranging and consumer identities) serves not only to connect production and consumption but, at the same time, allows UK retailers to dictate the relations of flower production across space. Exploring the circulation of knowledge thus helps us to unpack meanings and power relationships imbued in commodities, but also how these meanings and relationships are negotiated among actors in commodity networks.

Assessments of such alternative networks as 'fair trade' coffee (Whatmore and Thorne 1997; Raynolds 2002; Murray *et al*. 2003; Renard 2003) and 'ethically produced' flowers (Hughes 2000 2001) and 'veg' (Freidberg 2003a 2003b) are, as yet, preliminary. Indeed, an assessment of alternative consumption as a form of commodity culture *in and of itself* has scarcely been broached in either consumption studies or political ecology. We begin this task through case studies of green consumption and fair trade commodities to open up a novel yet critical analytical frame for both fields. Making use of a commodity cultures approach, the paper explores the social and economic practices by which these forms of consumption are affiliated with a multifaceted and discursive politics of conservation and production in the South. In particular, the aim is to look at how political ecology narratives of tropical forest conservation and the equitable treatment of producers underpin respectively 'conservation-seeking' and 'solidarity-seeking' commodity cultures. We thus explore how commodities become part of alternative consumption practices in a process that imprints and circulates specific political ecological understandings of the biophysical environments and peoples to be 'saved'.

And yet, in adopting this approach we do not support the ambivalent tendencies of commodity-focused studies that sometimes seem to be in danger of revelling in the endless creation of meanings and identities (cf. Jackson 2002a). Rather, and in keeping with politically engaged work on consumption (e.g. Leslie and Reimer 1999; Hartwick 2000), we prefer a *critical* edge to the study of alternative consumption based in political ecology. This allows our research to build not only on the achievements of post-structural political ecology, but it also enables the field to begin to take politicized consumption questions seriously. A concern with the understanding of 'politicised environments' (Bryant 1998) can thereby recognize the politicization of *both* production and consumption processes as important elements in the field's elaboration. As such, we are mainly interested in the political and economic significance of representations of 'being different', as Northern consumers participate in 'alternative' commodity cultures that thrive on political ecology themes linked to the South. We do not consider here, therefore, the precise meaning that consumers themselves derive from representational practices (cf. Jackson 1999 2002b).

It should also be noted – however briefly – that the 'consuming narratives' examined below reflect as well as reinforce particular moral geographies. The latter have been widely canvassed in recent years as a 'moral turn' in human geography and the social sciences occurs (Sayer and Storper 1997; Proctor 1998; Smith 2000; Popke 2003; Valentine 2003). Indeed, conservation- and fair trade-minded consumption would seem to be intimately bound up with debates over caring – and in particular, those debates that assess the relationship between space and caring (Goodman 2004). Thus, for example, David Smith's (1998) interrogation of 'how far we care' as well as the diverse processes by which we go about 'caring' seems to resonate well with

the sorts of alternative consumption featured in this paper.

Useful here too is what Whatmore (1997) terms a 'relational ethic'. Such an ethic seems to create economies of caring among consumers, producers, and indeed biophysical environments in the form of green and fair trade products. As Whatmore notes, a relational ethic involving

> intimate ethical connections between people and places, bodies and meanings, sometimes over considerable distances, make sense only through an acknowledgement of the material properties of nature-culture hybrids. (Whatmore 1997, 49)

It is clearly important to understand the processes through which this ethic is formed and shifts over time and space. In particular, it is necessary to know how alternative commodity cultures raise the prospect that certain Northern consumers are able to care over long distances – even if such caring is, in the end, hardly about behaving in a systematically different manner that might substantially alter the political or economic status quo. Indeed, politicized consumption in our case studies is seemingly about consumer 'resistance' involving reflexive behaviour through altered consumption. Ultimately, though, such resistance only seems to encourage yet more market innovation with new 'niche' commodities produced apparently to ease consumer angst. We suggest below that conservation-seeking and solidarity-seeking commodity cultures produce 'moral commodities' within a neo-liberal framing of the South.

Edenic myth-making in the conservation-seeking commodity culture

If 'caring at a distance' (Smith 2000) is an issue generally in the North, then caring as manifested through alternative consumption has apparently intensified as a result of growing anxiety about the plight of biologically diverse environments in the South. What we term a conservation-seeking commodity culture has diverse material and discursive aspects. However, of particular interest here is the manner in which this culture is predicated on Edenic myth-making. On the one hand, alternative consumption is inescapably associated with historical fantasies of the ecological 'Other' – what Arnold (2000, 6) dubs 'tropicality' (see also Putz and Holbrook 1988; Driver and Yeoh 2000). On the other hand, it is intertwined with political strategizing to 'save the Rainforest' (Horta 2000; Slater 2004). In the process, consumption serves as both a discursive and material connection between the tropical forest floor and the shopping mall door that repays careful scrutiny.

In this regard, Slater (1995 2002) shows how Northern popular perceptions of the Amazon, and of Amazonian 'nature' as a kind of Eden, encourage a particular understanding that is at odds with the more complex pattern of human–environment interaction that diverse scholars have described. Indeed, the Edenic narratives that are reported in the media, and consumed by Northern audiences, obscure from view harsh local conditions of violence and inequality that political ecologists have described over the years as they have sought to interpret a politicized environment (Bunker 1985; Hall 1989; Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Schmink and Wood 1992; Kolk 1996; Simmons 2002). The concern here, though, is to appreciate how a complex socio-ecological phenomenon such as the Amazon becomes simplified and embedded in Northern understanding in a particular way amenable to appropriation by 'alternative' consumption networks. This process occurs notably with reference to culturally resonant 'icons' such as 'wilderness' (an unsullied or original state of nature), 'jungle' (a threatening and chaotic place) or 'rainforest' (science, beauty and vulnerability) (Slater 2004).

These eco-cultural icons are pure Edenic myth-making. Yet they have severe political and economic consequences for the lives of people and biophysical environments in the Amazon. There is the politically linked and ecologically destructive resource extractivism such as mining, logging or cattle ranching (cf. Branford 2003 on murdered Brazilian indigenous leader Marcos Veron). There are the proposals to 'save the Amazon' from such extractivism via new disruptions, as efforts to 'make conservation pay' involve 'sustainable' commercial practices such as eco-tourism and non-timber forest production (cf. Schwartzman 1989; Silva 1994; and below). How Amazonian 'Indians' are portrayed in the North is seen to be indicative of the political-discursive influence and economic impact of Edenic narratives. This is so whether they are portrayed, for example, as subsistence-oriented 'Noble Savages' or market-linked 'Jungle Maharajahs' (Ramos 1994; Slater 1995). Here, 'environmental imaginaries' are closely linked to notions of indigeneity (Li 2004) – or as Ramos (2003, 356) puts it, 'pulp fictions of indigenism'.

As these narratives about the Amazon circulate, familiarity with the term 'rainforest' has opened up a brave (sic) new world of differentiated commercial possibilities in the North but also in middle-class enclaves in the South (Kaplan 1995; Connell 1999; see also note 1). This term is appropriated to sell products to the relatively affluent: hair gels, shampoos, lotions and potpourri, 'novelty' books, stuffed animals or package holidays. Indeed, just as tropical rainforest conservation becomes central to 'product placement' in the conservation-seeking commodity culture, political ecology themes are woven into the fabric of the 'alternative sales pitch'. Consider, for example, the case of the organic 'Amazon™ Flakes' cereal manufactured by the Nature's Path food company (Figure 1).

As Figure 1 illustrates, this sales pitch aims to work on several levels. Thus, the cereal is portrayed in a way designed to appeal to children – a highly lucrative sector of the breakfast cereals market. The words Amazon and Envirokidz appear over a tropical rainforest featuring luxuriant vegetation, exotic wildlife and smiling indigenous children. The image of the Earth is deployed to reinforce the seriousness of the conservation issues at stake in a recognizable manner. Written details are also added for the benefit of the parent or adult caregiver. These aim to appeal mainly on health grounds: 'grown without GMOs', 'wheat and gluten free' and 'no chemicals or preservatives'. Contrasting messages of '1% of sales donated to charity' and 'free CD offer' seem designed to clinch the appeal.

The conservation appeal continues on the back of the Amazon™ Flakes box. Here, promotion of 'caring at a distance' through 'wholesome' (organic) eating so as to halt the political ecology of tropical deforestation is rendered quite explicit in two passages:

> New Amazon™ Flakes sets you off on a journey of good taste and environmentally positive action every morning. Start with organic corn ripened under sunny North American skies and nurtured in rich loamy soil. Then add organic cane juice pressed from the finest sugar cane fields of the Amazon Basin . . . As you enjoy the rich, crunchy texture of Amazon™ Flakes, take a moment to enjoy the thought that you're helping protect animals, streams, oceans and life in the soil . . . from here in North American to the rich tropical rainforests in the Amazon. Wouldn't it be nice if all the food we ate was certified organic?

Under the heading 'Help the crunch on the rainforest' (a not so subtle reference to the iconic 'Rainforest Crunch' cereal; see Dove 1993), the destructive politics of old style 'extractivism' (cattle ranching) – a noteworthy topic in political ecology accounts of Amazonian politicized environments – is contrasted with the hopeful 'alternative' politics of conservation (related consumption):

> The Amazon Rainforest is not just a collection of trees, but a complex eco-system that has taken millions of years to grow. It's a tropical world filled with towering trees, gigantic ferns, flowering vines and a collection of animals, insects, and plant life found nowhere else on Earth. The Amazon rainforest is important to humans too. And scientists refer to rainforests as 'the lungs of the planet' because they convert carbon into life giving oxygen. *Rainforests are as fragile as dreams.* Right now, time is running out for our planet's rainforests, and the Amazon is being slashed and burned to make way for cattle farms. Everyday, thousands of acres of tropical rainforests fall victim to chainsaws and burning. And if we do nothing about it, we'll face the extinction of more plant and animal species than any other time since the dinosaurs disappeared off the face of the Earth. But there's still hope, and you can help save the Amazon rainforest for EnviroKidz in the future. By putting Amazon™ Flakes on your breakfast table, you've taken a big step towards preserving our planet's priceless genetic resources. [Italics in original]

The Amazon™ Flakes (note how the Amazon is appropriated through trademark designation here!) represents a carefully calculated attempt to appeal to a burgeoning 'alternative' and 'green' market – evoking political ecological 'crisis' in order to colonize Northern breakfast tables. That said, the crisis motif (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993) tends to obscure the rather opaque if not downright problematic link between consumption of this cereal and 'saving the Amazon'. For one thing, it is not clear how such consumption will actually lead to the 'big step' suggested in the blurb. For another thing, reference to 'organic juice pressed from the finest sugar cane fields of the Amazon Basin' would suggest some kind of direct link – and yet, a link of dubious value, to say the least, in any effort to conserve residual forest.

A somewhat different contribution to the conservation-seeking commodity culture is represented by the image and text associated with Howler's 'Rainforest Sorbet' (Figure 2). To be sure, familiar rainforest motifs are deployed – luxuriant rainforest and the ubiquitous monkey and hornbill – even as words like howler, rainforest and tropical seek to distinguish the product for the 'alternative' consumer. The blurb on the side of the container

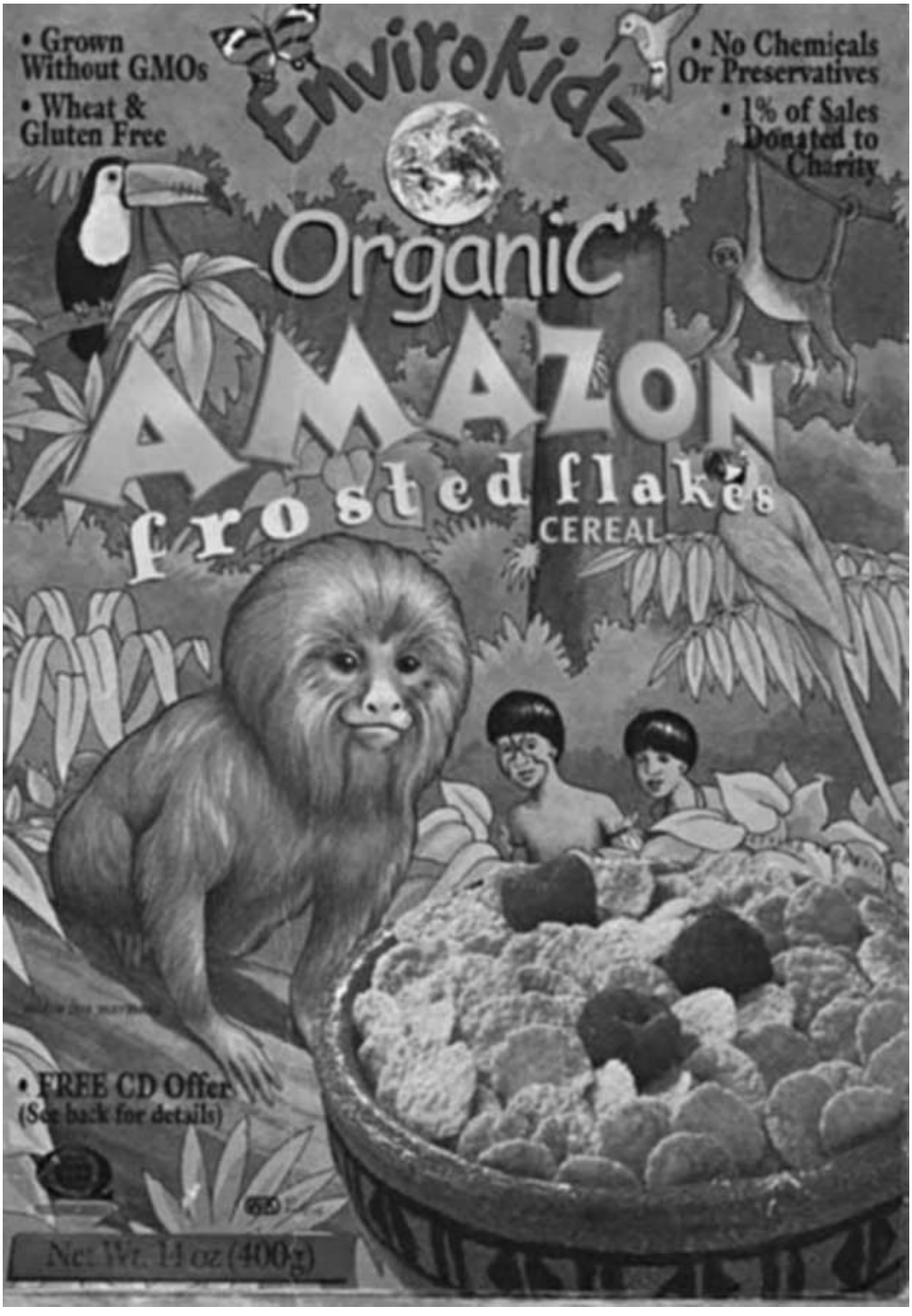

Figure 1 Image of 'Amazon Flakes' from Nature's Path

Figure 2 Images of Howler's 'Rainforest Sorbet'

reinforces the connections between goodness, consumption and conservation:

> Tropical Tangerine: The delicate citrus flavor of cajá will make your tongue want to hum a little Mozart. Howler sources cajá directly from an Amazonian co-operative. What we pay for the cajá fruit to make 1,000 pints of Howler sorbet can equal an Amazonian family's annual income, encouraging rainforest preservation.

Here, though, the message is unambiguously positive. Thus, it focuses on the perceived positive goal ('rainforest preservation') without dwelling on the forces threatening the rainforest. The message also suggests a direct impact in the Amazon arising from the consumption of Howler Rainforest Sorbet – via the local sourcing of the cajá fruit. Yet, here, too, the blurb for consumers obscures as much as it

reveals. Thus, for example, there is little sense of how much the company actually pays to its Amazon suppliers, let alone whether that income is sufficient for them. It is never clear therefore whether the practices extolled on the container constitute 'fair trade' (see below). It is not clear either how this business link to suppliers becomes 'encouraging rainforest preservation' since there is no sense of how that link relates to a wider political ecology of environmental change.

Indeed, in both examples, there is an unproblematic belief in what Dove (1993) calls the 'Rainforest Crunch' approach to conservation. This is based on the capitalist assumption that tropical deforestation is mainly due to a failure to tap the diverse riches that are contained in the rainforest, and which are merely waiting to be marketed. If only a range of valuable timber and non-timber forest products were brought to market in cooperation with indigenous peoples, then indigenous poverty and rainforest destruction would end (cf. Kaplan 1995 on the Body Shop). This seems to be rather naïve. After all, there is a sordid history of predatory elite behaviour portrayed in political ecology analyses that has commonly resulted in the felling of forests and oppression of people in the Amazon region as elsewhere in the South (e.g. Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Howitt 2001; Castree 2004).

However flawed, the belief that this approach will help save the rainforests is an indispensable element of the conservation-seeking commodity culture sustained by Edenic myth-making. It is a powerful inducement for middle-class consumers to 'do the right thing' by consuming 'rainforest products'. Here, as Price (1995) and Goss (1999) notably show, it is imperative to understand how Edenic visions are embedded in shopping-mall lifestyles. A paradox immediately arises. The shopping mall, which offers a window into the world of global capital, is the very symbol of ecologically destructive consumption. Yet nature stores (such as the Nature Company; see also N Smith 1996) have been one of the fastest growing sectors in shopping-mall retailing. Thus, the selling of Edenic rainforest myths is linked to a broader process whereby capital 'naturalizes' the shopping-mall lifestyle or reconciles 'nature' with the unnatural. As Goss observes, 'the Mall [of America] thus re-*stores* nature, and enacts its reconciliation with culture under the sign of the commodity' (1999, 60).

This process links a quest for consumer self-realization to the 'meaningful' practice of saving trees and indigenous people. As Price notes:

> In modern America harvesting nature for a psychic yield has become a defining middle-class pastime. We graft meanings onto nature to make sense out of modern middle-class life, and then define ourselves by what we think nature means. Authenticity, simplicity, reality, unique-ness, purity, health, beauty, the primitive, the autochthonous, adventure, the exotic, innocence, solitude, freedom, leisure, peace. No one item at the Nature Company means everything, but nearly every single product draws from this pool of meanings. (Price 1995, 190)

Here, nature represents a sense of place as well as a set of non-consumptive practices, that is, everything that fast-paced and rootless modern life is seemingly not. Yet, and as with our examples of Howler's Rainforest Sorbet and Amazon™ Flakes, firms like the Nature Company and the Body Shop return this set of beliefs and dreams to the realm of capital insofar as they peddle nature as 'anti-consumption consumption'. Edenic myth-making again plays a key part in this process as rainforests (and their inhabitants) appear in the guise of stuffed tigers, Zulu baskets, indigenous music, bathroom confectionery or Amazon posters. In each case, the (non) consumer is invited to 'consume the Other' (hooks 1992).[5]

This consumption process can be a figurative *and* literal process as notions of 'nature' and 'primitive' are shrewdly intertwined with consumption. Thus, as Goss (1999, 60) observes, the visitor to Mall of America can choose from such menu items as 'The Congo Mogambo' and 'Rasta Pasta' at the Rainforest Cafe while being (in the words of Rainforest Cafe promotional material):

> immersed in a tropical wonderland with . . . whimsical butterflies, crocodiles, snakes and frogs, trumpeting elephants and other spectacular wildlife; all moving within the surroundings of larger than life Banyan trees, with sounds and aromas of a tropical forest.

To eat at the Rainforest Cafe is thus not too unlike shopping at the Nature Company in as much as, in each case, it enables the consumer to 'connect to nature' – or, more precisely, those bits of 'nature' tapped by these companies. It is 'to plug into the flows of energy and resources, economic power and influence that define the modern American capitalist economy' (Price 1995, 200). That economy, in turn, is tied through complex consumption and production links to the 'farthest

reaches' of the South, including residual rainforests. This would not be possible, though, in the absence of a long process of Edenic myth-making shaping Northern (but also now Southern) middle-class notions about the rainforest (Putz and Holbrook 1988; Driver and Yeoh 2000).

Political ecologists have hitherto scarcely addressed the sort of conservation-seeking commodity culture sketched here that focuses on consumption practices occurring in supermarkets and shopping malls a 'world away' from the tropical forest struggles that are one of the field's standard narratives. This is a missed opportunity. Not only do these practices in the North shape cultural 'appreciation' of the rainforest among the politically and economically powerful (a process also shaped by media portrayal; see Slater 2004). They also increasingly condition the ways in which rainforests are integrated into circuits of capital through the consumption preferences of middle-class 'nature-lovers' who consider it perfectly – well – 'natural' to purchase plastic reproductions of 'The Vanishing Wild' at the Mall (Goss 1999, 65). In the end, then, El Dorado is not to be found in the depths of Amazonia. Rather, it can be located in those shopping malls and supermarkets that cater to people apparently keen to 'buy' a share of Nature and its conservation.

Fair trade via a solidarity-seeking commodity culture

The conservation-seeking commodity culture is not alone in the alternative consumption sector. For political 'radicals' there is a 'solidarity-seeking' commodity culture relating consumption to questions of social and economic justice. Here, to consume is to promote 'fair trade' and better conditions for labourers in the South. Estimated at over US$400 million per annum today, the turnover in fair trade commodities is growing at over 30 per cent a year and spans 800-producer groups in 45 countries (Raynolds 2002; FLO 2003a). Coordinated by NGOs in the UK and US since the late 1970s, the logic behind fair trade is to promote Southern development, particularly for marginal farmers. While coffee is the favoured commodity with some 550 000 growers in 300-producer organizations and European sales at US$250 to US$300 million per year (Rice 2001; Raynolds 2002), the trade in other commodities such as chocolate and bananas is growing rapidly.[6]

The ideal of 'trade not aid' is predicated on a system of production standards and certification maintained by NGOs devoted to these purposes such as the Fair Trade Labelling Organisation (FLO). At a minimum, fair trade 'works' through trading relationships defined by a bundle of characteristics: long-term contracts, direct trading routes, advanced credit, a guaranteed minimum price and a price premium for the commodity. Participating producer groups must be democratically run and utilize the premiums they receive for the social and economic development of members. As such, fair trade is said by proponents to unite 'many pressing issues, such as social, economic, and environmental justice' (Global Exchange 2002) taking 'caring at a distance' to a new level.

Academic work on solidarity-seeking commodity cultures is still in its infancy (e.g. Raynolds 2002; Schreck 2002 2004; Levi and Linton 2003; Murray *et al.* 2003; Renard 2003; Jaffee *et al.* 2004). Yet, for Whatmore and Thorne (1997), the elaboration of such cultures occurs through specific material and discursive processes of 'connectivity'. As they note, the narratives and material bases of fair trade's 'mode' of connectivity 'not only tells and performs but also tries to concretely embody a recursive effect of social, and sometimes environmental embeddedness' (Whatmore and Thorne 1997, 295). The narrative and material production of fair trade commodities can be understood in terms of two production 'moments' in which they are imbued with meaning and sets of power relations within the material circulation of fair trade products as well as their circulation within knowledge frames (Goodman and Goodman 2001).

The first production moment refers to the specific production of agroecology and livelihood that is encoded as 'fair trade' and endowed with ethical content in the very constitution of the commodity. This moment involves the processes involved in, say, coffee production, but also the ethical relations that affect those processes, as they are encoded by international standards groups. For many small coffee farmers, their production practices are organic by default, since they have been too poor to afford chemicals. In other cases, in order to join a fair trade market, the cooperative to which producers belong must commit to 'reducing the negative environmental impacts of production and processing of their coffee' (Rice 2001, 49).

The second production moment involves the moral discourses produced through narrative

Figure 3 Image of Café Mam marketing brochure

strategies on the labels of fair trade products (Goodman 2004). Figure 3 provides an example of narratives surrounding fair trade coffee sold under the Café Mam® brand. Conjoined with this image is a description of the production and consumption setting:

> Café Mam is grown by ISMAM (Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Madre of Motozintla), a social solidarity cooperative of native Mayan farmers living in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. ISMAM's mission is equally one of conserving and rebuilding the natural environment and one of working towards a higher quality of life for the indigenous campesinos and their families.
>
> Each purchase of ISMAM coffee helps support goals of: direct marketing (no intermediaries or coyotes), self-sufficiency and political independence, democratic decision making among communities, sustainable development of rural infrastructure, child welfare, including education and nutrition, defense of indigenous cultural identity, protection of forests, rivers, and tropical fauna, justice for indigenous peoples, promotion of women and women's rights.

At the centre of both image and text is one description of the political ecologies of production. The image is of an ISMAM farmer, toiling under the weight of fairly (and organically) grown coffee being brought to market for the eyes (and mouths)

of the consumer, but also for the benefit of the cooperative. The text more directly and vividly 'emplaces' the production of Café Mam, in cultural and geographical contexts, as a product of the 'social solidarity' of indigenous Mexican Mayans from the highlands of Chiapas (a region with cultural value on its own in the North). Consumers also enter the text through their purchases, each of which 'supports' a number of progressive social and ecological goals through fair trade. Recalling Whatmore and Thorne's (1997) description of fair trade's recursive effects of social and environmental 'embeddedness', the outcome here is one of 'direct' material, discursive, and ethical connection, whether visual or discursive, between Northern consumer and Café Mam's producer.

A second example of moral discourse linked to the second production moment is from Cafédirect (2003a). Here, the Internet is used to 'instruct' the consumer in the finer points of fair trade and its community impact (Figure 4). Thus, an initial web page allows the consumer to 'click on a region . . . to find out about the people and places that produce [their fair trade] coffee and tea' (upper image). The company then provides text and images of growers from the Peruvian cooperative that grows the coffee (lower image). To support the visual images of both the Café Mam and Cafédirect examples, narrative signifiers such as 'helping,' 'support' and 'difference making' are the way that Northern consumers learn that fair trade is a way of helping to maintain producer livelihoods, to rebuild communities, and to protect threatened biodiversity. Often the presentation of these products involves relating the biographies of producers, thereby imbuing fair trade products with the imprint of producers' place-based livelihoods for the consumer's benefit. To paraphrase McAfee (1999), this is the 'selling of place to save it.'

Since its inception, the fair trade market has been surrounded by a set of narratives, notably articulated by NGOs that emphasize issues of social justice linked to fair labour conditions. These narratives are an important framing mechanism in wider debates on trade, development and the environment, as well as the manner in which fair trade can overcome existing market obstacles by educating consumers about fair trade. On the one hand, NGOs 'share' the voices of producers to demonstrate the positive impacts of fair trade. Thus, Isaías Martínez, a representative of a Mexican coffee cooperative, states that

> the most important contribution of the Fairtrade Labeling system is in my eyes that our dignity as a human being is recovered. We are no longer a plaything of the anonymous economic power that keeps us down. (FLO 2003b)

On the other hand, consumers themselves are invited to testify on behalf of fair trade. In a piece about 'trusting your taste' by the Fairtrade Foundation, for example, one consumer confided:

> My name is Anna. I love great coffee and I *trust* the FAIRTRADE Mark. When I see the FAIRTRADE mark I know my coffee is made with *quality* beans brought directly from farmers around the world at a fair price. It's a partnership for a better future. (Fairtrade Foundation 2003, emphasis in original)[7]

With labels, brochures and NGOs, then, discourses from *both* Southern producers and selected Northern consumers play a key part in the political ecology narratives constructing networks of fair trade. While each has their own 'voice' to talk about fair trade, each benefits in their own way through the connections forged in the alternative economic and social links of the fair trade of coffee. Thus, while *both* production moments (i.e. the material and the discursive) are necessary for the construction of this solidarity-seeking commodity culture, this paper suggests the indispensable role that political ecology narratives play in the actual forging of these links of solidarity. It is through these narratives that moral connections are made between producers and consumers even as they encourage consumers to appreciate the merits of fair trade.

In teasing out key elements of a solidarity-seeking commodity culture, it is useful to contrast the fair trade case with that of the conservation-seeking commodity culture linked to Edenic myth-making discussed above. There are clear differences here in terms of the intertwined *knowledge*, *meanings* and *power relations* across these commodity cultures. First, the knowledge conveyed in the fair trade case privileges small producers and their labour in production. Thus, while fair trade discourses tend to stress residents as 'sustainable managers' of productive resources, the conservation-related discourse peddles traditional images such as that of the 'Noble Savage'. Second, and in contrast to the narrative of Edenic myth-making, fair trade discourses represent the biophysical environment as worked on 'second nature' – active intervention to produce coffee, chocolate or bananas – rather than a 'pristine wilderness' requiring protection.

Raul del Aguila with other Peruvian Cafédirect producers. Raul is 3rd from the right

Situated high in the Peruvian Andes is the famous Machu Picchu. The Andes rise to an altitude of 18 000 feet and are surrounded by lush, tropical valleys. The rich slopes of the Peruvian mountains offer the ideal climate for growing the high quality arabica beans that we have selected for our fresh ground and freeze dried instant coffees.

Close to the ancient Inca capital grow the organic gourmet beans that have been specifically cultivated to produce the single origin Organic Machu Picchu Mountain Special, Fresh Ground. Grown by farmers from the COCLA co-operatives, it is an aromatic, well-rounded coffee.

Figure 4 'Clicking' on Growers and Regions from the Cafédirect website to get to their Peruvian fair trade growers (Cafédirect 2003a 2003b). Edited from original website

For fair trade commodities, 'eating the Other' is consumption that is proclaimed to lead to the economic and social salvation of Southern producers. Seen in this way, then, fair trade indeed reflects a relational ethic, since it links consumers, fair trade commodities and producer livelihoods (Whatmore 1997). Selected Northern consumers purchase 'ethical commodities', while the act of consumption itself is politicized through these materially and socially embedded ethical relationships.

The relational ethic associated with fair trade is predicated on knowledge-intensive forms of commodity promotion (cf. Hughes 2000). Unlike Edenic narratives premised on deep-seated and generic but widely understood historical Northern conceptions of 'tropical nature', the relative novelty of ideas underpinning fair trade requires detailed dissemination of information to Northern consumers saying what fair trade is and why it is needed. Indeed, such knowledge can be quite place-specific – for example, including information on what cooperative and community is producing the coffee being consumed.

Further, the deployment of such detailed knowledge has an interesting if ambiguous effect on how

knowledge is expressed in commodity form. Unlike the fetish of the 'tropics' in Edenic narratives, the knowledge produced through fair trade works to *de-fetishize* the commodity (cf. Miller 2003; Sayer 2003). Thus, the aim is to peel away hidden layers of information about the commodity to reveal the social and environmental conditions of its production that are 'fair'. Value in solidarity-based exchange is created through the de-fetishizing of commodity cultures *precisely* to allow consumers, it is hoped, to make moral and economic connections to the producers of the food they ingest.

And yet, ironically, through the very act of revealing the production–commodity–consumer relationship in its 'full glory', the effect is to commodify, in turn, the ethical relationship deemed to be at the heart of fair trade – that is, small-scale farmers, producer cooperatives and 'sustainably' managed second nature. Fair trade knowledge flows thus act to *re-work* the fetish surrounding fair trade commodities into a new type of alternative 'spectacle' for Northern consumers. These networks thereby can be seen to heed suggestions to engage with the commoditizing fetish of capitalist markets in order to promote economic and social advance for poor producers (Cook *et al.* 2004; Goodman 2004). True, there is the possibility that the commodification of second nature, producer livelihoods and cultural difference can lead to positive local outcomes (e.g. Nigh 1997; Hernández Castillo and Nigh 1998). Yet this issue is still very much up for debate (see Jackson 1999). This is so because fair trade knowledge flows point to potential unforeseen ambiguities in market-led development, commoditization and politicized consumption – for example, unintended shifts in gender relations in the household – that solidarity-seeking commodity cultures must contend with in the years ahead.

That said, it is important not to exaggerate the differences between the two commodity cultures considered here. Consider again the role of the consumer in each commodity culture. True, fair trade representations usually cleave to a less hierarchical notion of development with producers as 'partners' and consumers as 'activists' (Whatmore and Thorne 1997). In the end, though, the figurative and literal power of the success of fair trade lies in the hands of consumers. Enlisting consumer 'support' and 'help' capitalizes seemingly on Northern consumer angst (let alone possible social pressures to 'look good'), but nonetheless perpetuates unequal power relations between producers and consumers in an unequal world. Indeed, consumer power is showing itself, for example, in the possible waning of demand for fair trade coffee. Thus, recent reports highlight 'flat' demand as a force retarding market growth notably in Europe and thereby causing some producers to return to 'conventional' outlets (Oxfam 2002; Renard 2003).

Conclusion: toward a political ecology of commodity cultures

Political ecology is at a point of great change, reflecting shifting theoretical as well as 'practical' developments in the 'real world' (cf. Peet and Watts 2004). Thus, for example, Bebbington and Batterbury argue for a political ecology of globalization. This view involves understanding how

> networks, people, organizations, and places become hooked into transnational relationships that become deeply implicated in the future trajectories of [local places in Southern development] – what they look like, of how people get by when they live in them, and of what they mean to people. (Bebbington and Batterbury 2001, 375)

This particular approach would blend materialist analysis of global capitalism with post-structural concerns about meaning, discourse and social movements through, for instance, novel transnational renderings of 'livelihood, scale, place, and network' (Bebbington and Batterbury 2001, 370). There is the need, too, for analytical purchase on the 'hybridic' re-working of livelihoods and landscapes through the 'progressively deeper integration of people into the market economy [and the] transnational flows related to migrations, transnational development networks, alternative trade networks, and the circulation of ideas' (Bebbington and Batterbury 2001, 372).

For us, consideration of the political ecology of globalization should encompass the project of conceptualizing commodity cultures that interweave transnational networks of development. In particular, we highlighted the deployment of ethically charged political ecology narratives drawn from diverse conditions and settings in the South. Thus, there is Edenic myth-making about 'tropical nature' in conservation-seeking commodity culture, while the promotion of social justice for poor producers via fair trade figured centrally in this

solidarity-seeking commodity culture. And, while clear differences do exist, say, between Amazon™ Flakes breakfast cereal and fair trade coffee, both use political ecology narratives to 'cultivate' Northern consumers.

'Re-cognizing' the nature of consumption and the commoditization of development – to return to the opening quote – holds a number of important implications for research in political ecology. First, integrating concerns about consumption and commoditization serve to correct a conceptual and analytical weakness in that field. Indeed, and as Watts and McCarthy (1997) observe, transnational green networks and social capital invested in their construction are 'barely understood'. Fair trade networks, 'ethical trade' (Hughes 2000 2001; Freidberg 2003a 2003b), and other organic and eco-labelled commodity networks (Nigh 1997; Barham 2002; Bray *et al.* 2002) are coming under closer scrutiny as these forms of 'alternative' development expand. Yet, the connections these commodity cultures engender between Southern producers, worked landscapes and Northern consumers need also to be directly linked to the processes and effects of consumption on local ecologies and communities as part of the project of 'thickly describing' a political ecology of globalization.

Indeed, through conservation-seeking and solidarity-seeking commodity cultures, the 'progressive contextualization' and 'chains of explanation' of eco-social changes in the South are taking on clear ethical and market traits. Landscapes and livelihoods are being fashioned out of global 'alternative' commercial practices just as they have been for a long time through conventional development processes (Escobar 1996; Bebbington 2000; Bebbington and Bebbington 2001). In the garb of 'alternative development', there is a 'geography of economies' (Lee and Wills 1997) that includes networks of commodities, transnational 'green' and activist NGOs, Northern consumers and changing consumer tastes and practices. The 'community' politics and identities that Watts (2000) has looming large in new research in political ecology are being constructed, at least in part, in relation to political ecology narratives of conservation- and solidarity-seeking commodity cultures.

Second, both of the commodity cultures studied here suffer from limitations – the conservation-seeking culture most vividly. Looking at fair trade dynamics, and solidarity-seeking commodity culture in general, is to address issues of consumption and commoditization that enable critical discussion about Northern consumption and connected networks as possible everyday resistance or 'liberation ecologies' (Peet and Watts 1996a; see also Peet and Watts 2004). Indeed, in relation to spaces created by consumer 'activists', integrating analysis of consumption into political ecology can point to the political and economic constraints that such activism puts on 'how far we care' (Smith 1998), let alone resistance to destructive forms of global capital (Klein 2000). That the social premium on fair trade coffee is five US cents a pound (Raynolds 2002) suggests that the political and economic transformative power of these markets will only be taken as far as the market will 'bear'.[8]

The consumption practices of the conservation- and solidarity-seeking commodity cultures described here offer one alternative to the call for a politics of redistribution. In the end, these cultures offer a privileged notion of transnational 'community' given the relatively high cost of purchasing commodities such as organic cereal and fair trade coffee. True, commodities that 'speak' to 'alternative' consumers can possibly make them more aware of what is happening to tropical environments and small-scale producers. And yet, only those that can afford to pay the economic premium can take part in this form of 'resistance'. Thus, 'moral' commodities may become 'alternative' in the larger sense by eschewing more progressive reconstructions of 'moral economy'. The creation of niche markets gives the North, albeit in geographically variable ways, the ability to 'tune in but drop out' of both conventional global economies *and* more demanding forms of resistance to social injustice and environmental degradation. A field of political ecology oriented towards the conceptualization of production *and* consumption dynamics is uniquely situated to explore the ambiguities of North/South connections evinced by alternative consumption-related politics.

Third, this paper builds on work that challenges dualistic thinking that has bedevilled human geography for some time. Examples of these schisms (and authors that challenge them) include those of nature/society (e.g. Murdoch 1997; Whatmore 2002), discursive/material (e.g. Cook and Crang 1996) and cultural/economic (e.g. Jackson 2002b; Sayer 2001). Considering together consumption and the commoditization of political ecology narratives further complicates the 'hybrid' or 'mutant' notions of landscape change and development

(Escobar 1999; Arce and Long 2000; Bebbington 2000). Breaking down the dualisms of production and consumption thus should provide critical space from which to examine the political ecologies of (alternative) development.[9] In some ways, starting from processes of commoditization and associated narratives of development allows the researcher to go 'forward' into the processes and meanings of consumption as well as 'backwards' along the powerful socio-economic and ecological networks of production and development.

Situated in both conservation- and solidarity-seeking commodity cultures is a distinct 'moveability' of 'place' and 'culture' in the political ecology narratives complicit in the commoditization of local 'places' in the South. In certain respects, then, the 'defence of place' from predatory globalization in the context of these commodity cultures is about 'place' and 'culture' *not* 'sitting in place' (cf. Escobar 2001; Winter 2003). In other words, the marketable and hence 'savable' portions of Southern places are freighted across space through circuits of 'alternative' capital, turning these very instances of globalization seemingly against themselves. This is particularly the case in the networks of solidarity that promote ideas about morality and social justice through modalities of fair trade production, marketing and consumption across the North and the South. We can only hope, as Jackson (2002b) does, that these commoditized cultural-cum-political exchanges lead to further multicultural appreciation of the plight of some Southern peoples *and* a sense of social and economic responsibility for 'distant strangers' (Corbridge 1998) that carries with it a practice that has political 'bite'.

Finally, in understanding this 'moveable feast' of place and culture through the commoditization of 'alternative' development narratives, our hope is that the approach taken here prompts further critical inquiry with an eye to keeping issues of production, power and inequality in mind. As work on culture, economy and materiality shows (e.g. Lee and Wills 1997; Ray and Sayer 1999; Cook *et al.* 2000; Cook and Harrison 2003), incorporating cultural materialism with political economic/ecological work can produce novel critical commentary on social and economic life around the world. Useful and indeed necessary here would be comparative analyses of the cultural articulation of alternative commodity cultures in different national or regional settings in *both* the North and the South. Further inquiry will need to deepen understanding of these commodity cultures by relating the sorts of representational practices assessed in this paper to the ways in which consumers themselves understand political ecology narratives – and indeed, the manner in which they assimilate that understanding to wider political, economic and cultural concerns that they may have.

Overall, we suggest in this paper that an important step in the move to a more rounded set of analytical concerns is the integration of key issues in consumption studies and political ecology through a commodity cultures approach. In the process, the aim and hope is to gain critical purchase on the commoditization process that is shaping development 'alternatives' in the South as it is framing 'alternative' consumption in the North.

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Notes

1 This pattern is changing somewhat – at least in relation to fair trade coffee networks – with the establishment of companies devoted to supplying coffee from indigenous Mexican groups for consumption by affluent consumers in Mexico City. Thus, a geography of consumption based notably on worldwide class distinctions is emerging.

2 On consumption geographies, see Crewe (2000 2001).

3 See Smith (1996) and Dixon (1999) for relevant applications here.

4 There is much debate as to the relative importance of political economy vis-à-vis post-structuralism in research (Gregson *et al.* 2001; Mansfield 2003b). Recent 'political economy-centred' work includes Hartwick (1998 2000), Leslie and Reimer (1999), Hughes (2000 2001) and Sayer (2001), while 'cultural studies-centred' work includes Cook and Crang (1996), Crang (1997), Cook *et al.* (1999), Jackson (1999 2000 2002b), Crang *et al.* (2003) and Dwyer and Jackson (2003).

5 Political ecologists have begun lately to emphasize the interrelated construction of race and nature in their accounts (e.g. Moore *et al.* 2003; Kosek 2004). Here, notions of racial 'purity', fear of the racialized 'Other',

and pure 'wilderness' collide powerfully. Yet, in the present discussion, we see how a different take on the racialized 'Other' leads to their *central* role in 'wilderness', albeit at a 'safe' distance from the 'alternative' consumers who view them.

6 Other commodities include tea, sugar, honey, mangos, rice and orange juice (FLO 2003a). There is also the beginning of a fair trade in footballs.

7 Lack of space prevents us from giving more detail about the issue of trust in either the conservation-seeking or solidarity-seeking commodity culture. To simply note here then, that with fair trade – as often with other 'quality' systems such as organic foods (Guthman 2002) or ethically traded commodities (Freidberg 2003a 2003b; Hughes 2004) – there are two primary ways that trust is established for consumers. The first way is the deployment of 'legitimizing' images and discourses of production conditions and producer communities. The second way is through a 'standardization' of trust. This process entails the construction of labelling schemes based on a globally defined set of production standards and norms of certification. These aim to build consumer trust in, for example, the brands that carry recognizable fair trade certification logos and 'marks'. While Barham (2002) has attempted to produce a theoretical take on such labelling, the issue of trust in these commodity cultures requires further research. For a broader analysis of trust, see Misztal (1996) and for one analysis of the role of trust in relation to the empowerment of NGOs, see Bryant (2004).

8 Producing 'quality' is important in the fair trade market, as producers who fail to meet standards are often excluded from that market. In a personal anecdote, this issue of 'quality' played itself out in my (MG) former department at Santa Cruz. The department coffee club tried and rejected a local source of fair trade coffee because of its 'poor taste'. Seemingly, 'taste' can only be political as long as it tastes 'good' (cf. Guthman 2002 2003). On the cultural construction of taste, see Bourdieu (1984).

9 From this recasting of 'hybridity', we might re-examine Escobar's (1999) 'regimes' of nature to instead ask *who* is included in or excluded from consuming organic, capitalist and techno-natures, and why this is the case. We might look, too, at how consumer politics shape *which* 'parts' of nature are defined as organic, capitalist or techno, and relate these constructions to material consequences.

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