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MY FAVORITE COFFEE SHOPS

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AND PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

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ABSTRACT. What makes a coffee shop a favorite, most people would suggest such things as the taste or quality of the drink itself and accompanying food offerings such as bagels or croissants. Others might suggest the importance of cost or the excellence of the service. Still more fussy others would refer perhaps to the elegance of the shops' interior or exterior appearance, and the comfort of the chairs and tables. For me, although these are all crucial aspects that create the ambience, scene, or even the habitus of the coffee shop, it is the feeling that I get upon entering the place. In this autoethnographic visually-enhanced essay I will focus on the similarities of coffee shops in urban Brooklyn, New York and bucolic Litchfield, Connecticut.

KEYWORDS: McDonaldization, Habitus, Sociability, Simulation, Visuality

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1980's most situation comedies on American Television were introduced with an appropriate theme song. One of the most popular shows was *Cheers*. Its theme song, "Where Everybody Knows Your Name," captured the sense of camaraderie between the characters who regularly frequented an iconic local tavern in Boston.

The following is a distillation of the lyrics from the "Theme from *Cheers*", written by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo:

*Making your way in the world today
Takes everything you got
Taking a break from all your worries
It sure would help a lot
Wouldn't you like to get away?
Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name*

*And they're always glad you came
You want to be where you can see
The troubles are all the same
You want to be where everybody knows your name¹.*

In my experience, after only a few weeks of frequenting even a coffee shop chain like Starbucks the regular staff seems able to anticipate your order. Perhaps they are trained to do so as a matter of efficiency. At less corporate, more intimate local venues, after friendly exchanges, regular staff are also liable to greet you by name. It is this real or imagined sociability that for many people, like myself, evolves into patron loyalty.

1.1. HISTORY, THEORY AND GEOGRAPHY OF MY COFFEE SHOP ROUTINES

Going out early in the morning to buy the newspaper, and to read it at a conveniently located coffee shop, is a ritual that I have practiced ever since the birth, infancy, toddler, and pre-teen stages of my three daughters, **being** the practice of reading the morning newspaper in the peace, quiet, and comfort of my own home during the morning hours a less than optimal choice. Since about 1970, I have carried this morning ritual far and wide as I visited cities around the world for conferences and research. In this essay I will focus on my “regular” daily coffeeshops in two very different locations of the United States.

In my half-century-long experience of sampling coffeeshops, I have inductively inferred that like restaurants, coffeeshops in the United States of America fall within a range between two broad categories of food purveyors – Fast and Slow. As will be elaborated upon later in this essay, these two types fit nicely within Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of Tastes of Necessity and Luxury, as well as George Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis. Without the

need of deeper discussion here, the most commonly used hyphenated term, “Fast-Food”, is defined as “relating to, or specializing in food that can be prepared and served quickly”, as in a *fast-food* restaurant. The food itself is: “designed for ready availability, use, or consumption and with little consideration given to quality or significance²”. On the other hand, “Slow Food,” is defined as “Luxury food that has been prepared with care, using high-quality local and seasonal ingredients³”. It should be noted in regard to Slow Food, that it is also a global movement⁴.

1.2. THE IDEAL COFFEE SHOP: THE VIENNESE COFFEE HOUSE (*DER WEINER KAFFEEHAUS*)

As to a model of luxurious coffee shops with which all lesser coffee shops can be compared, I suggest the Viennese coffee house which UNESCO added to the intangible cultural heritage list for Austria. As described by *Visiting Vienna* tourism website:

Perhaps the one truly defining element is the absence of any pressure to order more or move on. The staff will leave you more or less in peace until you ask for another drink or the bill. You can sit there for hours having bought a single coffee. (And some people do). Even if the place is full and the queue outside seems intimidatingly long. The coffee houses even encourage this behaviour with another little tradition. Somewhere inside each one is a rack, table or stand covered in newspapers for you to borrow. So... forget yoga, meditation, weekend retreats, and time management courses. If you really want to relax, all you need is a Viennese café and your reading glasses. (Of course, you may attract an inquiring look or two at some point. And most of us understand that this wonderful aspect of coffee house life should not be abused). This congeniality and leisurely approach to the day turned Vienna’s cafés into legendary meeting places for artists and actors, poets and politicians, writers, intellectuals, and revolutionaries⁵.

1 Lyrics taken from *Songfacts*: <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/gary-portnoy/where-everybody-knows-your-name>, last accessed December 6, 2022.

2 See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fast-food>, last accessed December 6, 2022.

3 See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/slow-food>, last accessed December 6, 2022.

4 See for example Slow Food International <https://www.slowfood.com/>, last accessed December 6, 2022.

5 See <https://www.visitingvienna.com/eatingdrinking/coffee-house-experience/>, last accessed December 6, 2022.

As might be expected, coffee shop businesses large and small attempt to simulate this model. During my international travels, I have visited many Viennese and Viennese-style coffee houses in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and The Czech Republic. There are also a few in New York City; most notable is Cafe Sabarsky at the Ronald S. Lauder Neue Gallery Museum for German and Austrian Art which is a reasonably opulent visual simulation replete with a rack of newspapers⁶. I have eaten there several times, and it is in great demand usually requiring reservations well in advance. This overcrowding of the *Weiner Kaffeehaus* simulation however destroys the congeniality and leisurely characteristics of the original.

1.3. MATTERS OF TASTE

Pierre Bourdieu might argue that upscale coffee shops are productions of “Symbolic Capital”, which he defined as “the collection of luxury goods attesting to the taste and distinction of the owner” (1977, p. 188). Bourdieu’s *Distinction* between the taste of “necessity” and the taste of “luxury” also helps understand how a range of such establishments become attractive to more and less advantaged consumers of goods, and services (1984, p. 174–5). In this regard, I have looked for, and found, visible symbolic expressions of class position and aesthetic tropes in many other types of commercial establishments such as restaurants and good emporia. To paraphrase Bourdieu: Habitus is the learned set of preferences or dispositions by which people orient themselves to their social worlds (Bourdieu 2002, p. 27. Also, Edgerton and Roberts 2015, p. 195). These aesthetic distinctions also work as barriers between social divisions. In sum, Taste is a:

[...] systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence, i.e., as a distinctive life-style, by anyone who possesses practical knowledge of the relationships between dis-

tinctive signs and positions in the distributions – between the universe of objective properties, which is brought to light by scientific construction, and the no less objective universe of lifestyles, which exists as such for and through ordinary experience (Bourdieu 1984, p. 174–5).

I first encountered the idea of the coffee shop as a semiotic of gentrification in Roland Atkinson’s “Domestication by Cappuccino or a Revenge on Urban Space?” (2001, also 2003), which owes part of its title to Sharon Zukin’s description of the revitalization for Bryant Park, New York City as “domestication by cappuccino” (1995, p. 4). The renaissance of that urban place included a fashionable café. The ten-acre public park was once dubbed “Needle Park” as a favorite for drug users. A *New York Times* article by John Leland, “A New Harlem Gentry in Search of Its Latte”, adds support to the notion of coffee as gentrification cache as he wrote:

What is the relationship between home and a good cup of coffee? On first reckoning, coffee (or tea) organizes space and movement; in the brewing of a serviceable cup, a house becomes a home. Yet there is also a public way that coffee shapes the sense of home, even from down the block. If you sketched the foot traffic around a cup of espresso, for example, you might see the pattern of intersecting lines that Jane Jacobs described in her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). ...The appearance of amenities here, similarly, both reflects and facilitates the real estate boom (F6) (Leland 2002).

Atkinson also discussed the commodification and the theming of spaces for the general public that tames them down and, more importantly, I think, erodes the sense that they are open to all (2001, p. 4). In this regard we might ask: “How is a public space visibly open to all?”. Just as a pleasant scene or an attractive sign invites one to come inside, the same appearances may simultaneously repel or make another observer feel unwelcome. The simplest analogy for this might be a rich or a poor person reading the menu

⁶ See <https://www.neuegalerie.org/cafesabarsky>, last accessed December 6, 2022.

posted outside a coffee shop before deciding to enter.

1.4. FORDISM, TAYLORISM AND McDONALDIZATION OF COFFEE SHOPS

At base, coffee shops are modern urban amenities. As economic enterprises, therefore, they are subject to what Max Weber described as the rationalization of modern life resulting a dehumanizing “iron cage” of uniformity. (Weber 1958, 1964, Kalberg 1980). Fordism, and Taylorism have their source in from Weber’s theorizing. Their main elements are detailed technical divisions and the precise measurement of time needed for particular tasks. In the process, the mental is separated from manual work as workers perform simple, repetitive tasks with short job-task cycles. In Marxian terms, these practices alienate workers from the product of their labor; and not incidentally justify low-pay and benefits (Hudson 2009). Relatedly, George Ritzer defined McDonaldization as “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (1993, p. 1). These principles include efficiency, predictability, calculability, and comprise the rationality of McDonaldization (Ritzer 1993, p. 24. Also Ritzer 1998). Fast food shops are designed to limit the interaction between customer and staff. This service efficiency increases profit-making in the allotted time frame and, in essence, dehumanizes cultural eating practices.

Ritzer’s postmodern analysis also leans on Jean Baudrillard’s notions of *simulacrae*. (Baudrillard 1983, 1998, 2021a) We can apply this notion to the simulated and scripted interactions, or perhaps meaningless sociability, between patrons and service staff which are commonly observable in most chain coffee shops such as Starbucks and Dunkin’ Donuts. In this regard, the value of scripted communications between food service workers and customers has been subject to scientific analysis (Chan & Sagarán 2018). Similar staff training takes place at the other end of the spectrum, as upscale shops try to

simulate the aura of the *Weiner Kaffeehaus* (Vienna Coffee House).

Some of these luxurious coffee shops could be seen as what Jean Baudrillard (1983), called a “third order of simulacra” that are found in the postmodern age. As opposed to representations previously discussed as the product of reality, these representations are prior to and determine the real. The postmodern inability to distinguish between reality and the simulacrum results from a number of factors or forces, especially the current media culture that not only relays information but also interprets it for the receiver (Baudrillard 1983). This formulation helps to understand the value of Baudrillard’s societal condition of “hyper-reality” in which we cannot distinguish realities from their simulations (Baudrillard 1998). As we will see later in this essay, patrons and staff can subvert the generally Fordist-Taylorist-McDonaldization aims of fast-food shop owners to maximize profit by limiting wasteful interactions between them, by forming teams and engaging in performances that can imbue meaningless routines of sociability with more meaningful social and psychological contents.

1.5. TAKING PEOPLE OUT OF THE PICTURE

The extremes of rationalization of the food industry in automation and robotization are designed to eliminate the human element; except for customers. I remember in the 1950s having a coffee at a Horn and Hardart Automat. Coffee was self-service and as the food was prepared by people, it was only a simulation of “automatic”. As described by Michelle Cohen:

Sleek steel and glass vending machine grids displayed sandwiches and main dishes as well as desserts and sides, each in their own little boxes, square and even, clean and well-lit. You put a coin in the slot, opened the door and removed your food – which was reportedly quite good, as the founders took terrific pride in their craft. For some, it was the idea of choice, and the satisfaction of seeing exactly what you were about to select; the interactive aspect of putting a coin in the slot and unlocking a world of mac-and-cheese goodness; the mysterious disembodied hands whisking a hot meal into

a tiny cubby from behind closed doors. It was like a magic show-with food (Cohen 2016).

Today there are a few totally automated, robotic, eating places. They are especially featured in Japan which has a major problem of labor shortages.

At lunchtime, the Sushiro restaurant near Tokyo's Ogikubo train station is packed with families, couples and business people, but one thing is missing: staff. Instead of receptionists, diners use a touch panel to find a table. At their seats, they navigate a tablet to order from a menu spanning some 130 items including sushi, ramen noodles, fried chicken and hot coffee. The dishes are delivered directly to the table via a conveyor belt. A self-serving register awaits them on their way out (Suzuki and Nagumo 2018).

Similarly, in the Hong Kong Genki Sushi restaurant where "Finally, you can go to a nice restaurant and order, eat and pay for your food without the inconvenience of interacting with humans (Staff Author 2020).

1.6. PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP

Despite trying to eliminate the vestiges of human agency, businesses simultaneously try to simulate the feeling of being at home through design and psychological marketing research. For example, Vahagn S. Asatryan, and Haemoon Oh (2008) suggested methods for creating strong customer relationships by psychologically stimulating a sense of belonging. Their "psychological ownership" (PO) model is a state in which individuals feel as though they own the places they frequent. PO is important because loyal customers are willing to purchase more, pay higher prices, and offer positive word-of-mouth recommendations to others. Obviously, customer willingness to pay more is critical. They note a study that:

[...] found that affectively committed customers are more likely to pay premium prices for the same benefits provided by service companies. Such an emotional attachment is consistent with the notion of psychology of mine. PO assumes protection of the object and willingness to sacrifice to maintain the relationship. Thus, feelings of PO may motivate an individual to

incur higher costs or pay premium prices to maintain the relationship with a particular target of PO such as a restaurant. Customers who feel attached to and bonded with their PO objects are more likely to spend more for the benefits derived from those objects (Asatryan and Oh 2008, p. 369).

1.7. THIRD PLACES

Ray Oldenburg argued that coffee shops and other third places are important for civil society, democracy, civic engagement establishing feelings of a sense of place. First places are homes. Second places are workplaces and examples of third places are churches, cafes, clubs, public libraries, bookstores and parks. As anchors of community life, they facilitate and foster creative interaction (Oldenburg 1991). Georg Simmel would refer to these scenes as opportunities for meaningful sociability in one's home away from home.

Benedict Smith focused on coffee shops as third places. He noted Vice President of Coffee Enterprises, Spencer Turner's observations that coffee shops, diners, and taverns face common problems: "It's difficult, because to be an effective third place, coffee shops have to entice customers to stay for a while. However, once they've enticed the customer, these places need to make money. The problem is that people often sit over a single drink for hours in coffee shops and most businesses can't operate successfully in this way" (Smith 2021). Unless, pointed out by Asatryan and Oh (2008), customers are willing to pay a premium for the luxury.

Smith adds that Starbucks was founded on Oldenburg's theory of the third place. Its CEO Howard Schultz had been impressed by his experience in espresso bars in Italy and thought he could simulate it in America. According to Smith, Schultz said in an interview: "Starbucks serves as a third place between home and work, an extension between people's lives, at a time when people have no place to go". However, since expanded to more than 32,000 locations it no longer embodies the third place "community spirit" in the same way (Smith 2021).

1.8. DESIGN AND AMBIANCE

Steven Buckley argues that coffee shop ambiance is as important as the coffee:

Today's coffee shops promote relaxation and lounging. Provide stylish couches and comfortable chairs for those that wish to enjoy their beverages while reading or working on their computers. Wi-Fi (wireless Internet access) installations are mandatory in coffee shop settings. The use of dark woods to convey a feeling of earthiness is also recommended. Be careful not to use light fabrics or colors that are easily stained by coffee anywhere in your store. Add background music and attractive shelving (for retail coffee product sales) as the finishing touches to an enjoyable coffee-drinking environment (Buckley 2023).

The ironic title of Gerald Zaltman's "Rethinking Market Research: Putting People Back", epitomizes the scientific management approach to simulating places "where everybody knows your name". He outlines the use of physiological measures such as electroencephalograph (EEG) measures, skin reactance, vocalics, pupillography, positron emission tomography (PET) scans and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI):

These have created new opportunities to measure with far greater precision than previously possible, mental events that were not amenable to ready observation until recently. New technologies expected in the next few years, coupled with the rapid accumulation of knowledge about brain structure and functioning, promise even more exciting opportunities to act on several of the premises discussed at the outset of this article (Zaltman 1997, p. 432).

Finally, as to marketing research through surveys, interviews, and observation sessions, Lisa Waxman found the top five characteristics of the ideal coffee shop, some of which were quite visual, included cleanliness, aroma, adequate lighting, comfortable furniture, and a view to the outside (Waxman 2006, p. 55). In a related vein, Halawa and Parasecoli developed an analytical framework for studying the emergent cultural formation around eating and drinking that can easily be applied to coffee shops. Their work is especially relevant given their fo-

cus on what they call "Global Brooklyn" and my own focus here on local Brooklyn (Halawa, Parasecoli, 2019).

2. PUTTING PEOPLE INTO THE PICTURE

2.1. DRAMATURGY AND SCENES

Rather than think of workers and customers in coffee shops as cogs in a wheel to be manipulated to maximum profit, we can think of them as social actors who have agency. Employing his Dramaturgical Method, Erving Goffman would describe and analyze social scenes in coffee shops as "performances" (1959, p. 15). Customers and staff are the actors as well as the audiences who organize their routines around the expectations of each other. These performances or "social fronts" (*ibid.*, p. 26) can include more than one routine. Goffman also notes that some routines are "socialized" or "...molded and modified to fit the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is represented" (*ibid.*, pp. 34–35). This allows for differential cultural or idiosyncratic contents. For example, beyond the language difference, getting *un caffè* in a Naples bar is very different from getting one in a Brooklyn coffee shop. Customers and staff become "teams" (*ibid.*, p. 79), who cooperate, or attempt to cooperate, to stage the single routine.

Other important aspects of team performances are intended to control behavior and unmeant gestures in order to prevent incidents and embarrassments (*ibid.*, pp. 208–37). It is also important in keeping the actors prepared for the unexpected problems of the performance. This "dramaturgical circumspection" includes preparing carefully for the show and choosing a proper stage and performers. Finally, there is "tact regarding tact," which is the moral obligation of the audience for the performers to ignore mistakes and anomalies. Such practices provide tangible and intangible benefits for all team members. Tangible benefits for me as a customer are better service, and occasionally less cost. For staff it is regular and larger tips. The intangible benefits for both sides of the exchanges are recognition and friendship.

Another useful approach to understanding coffee shop performances of staff and customers are theories of “scenes”. Alan Blum was the first social theorist to develop the concept of a “scene” paying attention to their inner experiences and dynamics. “In everyday life we speak regularly about scenes, and it is in such ways that the scene first appears to and for us. Then we ask, what are we talking about when we address the world in these ways, is there a persistence underlying this diversity?” (Blum 2003, p. 165).

In “Scene Thinking,” Benjamin Woo, Jamie Rennie and Stuart R. Poyntz (2015) contend that scene thinking can do important work for the cultural analyst.

They are typically understood as loosely bounded social worlds oriented to forms of cultural expression. They provide systems of identification and connection, while simultaneously inviting acts of novelty, invention and innovation. Scenes are set within the fabric of everyday life but also function as an imagined alternative to the ordinary, work-a-day world (2015, p. 287).

In contrast to seeking authentic familiarity in local scenes, Clark, et al employed scene thinking to the value of Starbucks’s corporate authenticity where you feel sure to get the same, reliable service everywhere, and:

[...] that because it was corporate it would be run efficiently, you wouldn’t have to chitchat with the employees, you knew that both the employees and you would be held to and judged by objective standards, and there would be no surprises. If you’ve felt this, then you’ve had some sense of what it means to have an institution authenticated by its corporateness. Conversely, if you’ve ever felt an aversion to walking into Starbucks – not because you disagree with its politics or you don’t like its coffee, but just because its distance, impersonality, and incessant profit-maximization make you queasy – then you’ve felt what it means for corporateness to indicate a form of inauthenticity. Corporateness can thus put a stamp of authenticity on a business that can be as reassuring as knowing that the business is local (Clark et al. 2006).

Another important theoretical concept for understanding performances and scenes is “sociability”, the super-rationalization of which, such as scripted customer-client relationships, makes it meaningless. As to meaningless sociability Georg Simmel writing on “The Sociology of Sociability,” refers to the special sociological structure of art and play which are performed for their own sake.

In the same sense one may speak of an impulse to sociability in man. To be sure, it is for the sake of special needs and interests that men unite in economic associations or blood fraternities, in cult societies or robber bands. But, above and beyond their special content, all these associations are accompanied by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others (1949, p. 254). In contrast, Simmel adds, being cut off from this life results in “... an empty nature suspended in the air” (1949, p. 261).

3. THE PERFORMANCES, ROUTINES AND SCENES AT MY FAVORITE COFFEE SHOPS

3.1. PARK SLOPE, BROOKLYN

There are many levels of scenes. Here, as will come later in reference to coffee shops in Litchfield, Connecticut, is a broader district-wide scene that provides the setting for the local coffee shops in the district. *StreetEasy* is a high-end real estate listing platform for both rentals and sales. It describes Park Slope At a Glance:

Park Slope has a tranquil, easygoing vibe and can almost feel suburban. Strollers and children of all ages are a constant presence on sidewalks, as are shoppers patronizing local boutiques and dog walkers heading up to the park. Residents are Brooklynites through and through and tend to be socially conscious, artistically minded, and committed to their community. At night, a casual restaurant scene comes alive. For anyone looking for a night out, there are plenty of beer gardens and

wine bars to patronize, especially in the South Slope, but don't go looking for dance clubs⁷.

Streeteasy describes Park Slope's mood as "laid-back", "[...] a place where you get to know your neighbors", and where in nearby Prospect Park "Kids, bikers, runners, dogs, and residents of all ages can be found enjoying its 526 acres of green space⁸".

The most powerful indicators of gentrification revolve around race and social class in the form of data about income, home values, apartment rents, and educational attainment. Within the primary ZIP Codes for Park Slope (11215 and 11217) in 2020 the population Park Slope's population was 44,321. About two-thirds of the population was White, while less than about forty percent of New York City as a whole was White. In 2020, the Median Household Income in the primary ZIP Codes for Park Slope was about \$130,000, which was more than double that for the United States. Further elite status is indicated by the fact that three-quarters of Park Slope residents aged 25 and above earned Bachelor's Degrees which is more than double the rate in United States. Another indicator of luxury is housing costs. Furman reported that in 2019 the Median Gross Rent in Park Slope/Carroll Gardens was \$2,400 and the median sales price of 1-family buildings was \$3,113,000⁹.

3.1.1. THE CONNECTICUT MUFFIN

The most frequent, almost exclusive, venue for performing my coffee shop routine in Park Slope is the Connecticut Muffin which I have patronized for more than thirty years. The Connecticut Muffin company is owned and run by an Egyptian-American family and there are five more iterations in other upscale Brooklyn neighborhoods. Mine is locat-

ed on Bartel-Pritchard Square which is adjacent to Prospect Park. The 526-acre park was designed and constructed in the second half of the 19th century by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. It is a premiere destination for Brooklyn visitors and residents alike. As with most upscale eateries in the area, the signage and outward appearance is designed to convey a sense of luxury (See Figure 1). The inside appearance mirrors the outside, and offers upscale products such as specialty coffees and teas, a fancy espresso machine, an attractive array of desserts, and a coffee grinder that customers can use to freshly grind its expensive, signature special blends (See Figure 2). The coffee shop is about a quarter-mile from my home. On most days, I leave my house at about 6:30 AM and buy *The New York Times* at a local grocery store owned by a Palestinian-American. Then I walk to Prospect Park for a slow, two-mile jog, with a friend. We end our run at the coffee shop at about 7:30 AM.

My daily coffee shop visiting routine was curtailed during the strict New York State-wide COVID-19 Lockdown from March 7 to June 24, 2020 ordered by Governor Andrew Cuomo. During this period which only "essential businesses" were allowed to operate. These were limited to Communications and Information Technology, Financial Services, Health Care, Personal services, Retail stores that sell products necessary for health and safety, such as food, sanitation supplies, and products to maintain habitability, Food supply chain, and Transportation¹⁰.

The pandemic had a lasting effect on the routine. Before the lockdown, my fellow team members (the staff) at Connecticut Muffin saved a ceramic cup especially for me behind the counter. Even before the lockdown, other customers were not served hot beverages in such

⁷ Source: <https://streeteasy.com/for-sale/park-slope>, last accessed April 27, 2022.

⁸ See <https://streeteasy.com/for-sale/park-slope>, last accessed April 27, 2022.

⁹ Data for this section was gathered from the US Census FactFinder, and the American Community Survey (<https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/park-slope-carroll-gardens>, last accessed April 27, 2022).

¹⁰ Source: https://ballotpedia.org/Federal_definitions_of_essential_and_non-essential_businesses_during_the_coronavirus_%28COVID-19%29_pandemic,_2020, last accessed April 27, 2022.

a cup because the owners had switched from ceramic cups and glassware to paper and plastic cups to save on expenses. Also, when I restarted my routine after the lockdown, not only were we required to wear masks and unable to sit inside for several months, but, as a further precaution, the cup was no longer offered me. I must add that the taste of coffee suffers greatly when it is drunk from paper or foam cups as compared to ceramic or porcelain vessels.

At Connecticut Muffin, there are usually only two staff members behind the counter (See Figure 3). Although there is little Fordist specializations as to tasks, only one of the staff members has cash register duty. However, the designated cashier shares all the other tasks as well when needed. These other tasks are making hot and cold drinks, preparing sandwiches, soups, and restocking as well as cleaning inside and outside spaces. Over the three decades during which I have been patronizing Connecticut Muffin the staff members have been either Latino (Mostly Mexican) or Middle Eastern-Americans.

At the time I arrive in the morning, the coffee shop is seldom overcrowded. Nearby are entrances to the subway as well as Bus stops. Most customers come only for take-out service but there is ample seating for those patrons who have the time and inclination to linger (See Figure 4). Everyday, there are also a few customers who sit at tables with laptop computers connected to the Internet. I questioned a few and found, that they were working remotely. Many of the professionals in Park Slope had worked remotely during the Lockdown and some continue the practice.

When I enter, I call out an *Hola!* as most of the workers are Mexican Americans who usually seem pleased for my efforts at learning their native language. Much of our daily banter takes place in Spanish. The owner of the coffee shop is an Egyptian-American Muslim and if he, or one of the Muslim staff is there, I offer a "*Sabah al-khair*," to which they reply *Sabah al-noor*." *Hola, Sabah al-khair*

and *Sabah al-noor* are Spanish and Arabic phrases morning greetings respectively. My running partner and I then take up our usual table near the window before going to the counter to pay. In most coffee shops, placing ones reading material on the table or clothing item on a chair is the culturally accepted way of claiming a private space (See Figure 5).

Since I am a "regular," the staff knows what I want so there is no need to "order" verbally. My daily order is a medium-sized coffee with hot milk and a well-toasted ciabatta roll, with no butter (*sin mantequilla*). I must note that the milk for my coffee is steamed at no extra charge, and although there is no table service, if there is a delay because of a larger than usual crowd, my toast is brought to me at my table even though I often suggest that they merely throw it to me (*tiramelo*).

Recently, one of the newer Mexican-American workers has been saying *Provecho!* when giving me my ciabatta roll. The common phrase in Spanish is *Buen Provecho*, but Mexicans more frequently simply say "*Provecho!*" the term has a meaning similar to the Italian *Buon Appetito!* Without having to order, there is no need to do anything else but pay with my Connecticut Muffin Gift Card and leave a generous cash tip. We sometimes exchange enquiries about our families. For example, two of the young female workers have children. One was a recent birth and the young mother has taken time off from work to care for the infant. To celebrate the birth of their children, I gave each a gift of something my wife Suzanne had knitted for them. I also give a cash gift to the staff for Christmas. When I leave, we exchange *Mañanas* and if the owner, or other Muslim friends, are there I add *Ma Salaama!* I must add, as to familiarity, my daughters Karen and Kristin often come to the shop on their way to work at local schools, and on several occasions I have brought my grandchildren to the shop and introduced them to the staff and owner (See Figure 6). Of course, there are other regulars at Connecticut Muffin, some of whom

have become part of the scene by sharing greetings, banter, and occasional conversations about life and politics.



FIG. 1. CONNECTICUT MUFFIN, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 2. CONNECTICUT MUFFIN, INSIDE APPEARANCE, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 3. CONNECTICUT MUFFIN, STAFF, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 4. CONNECTICUT MUFFIN, SEATING AND LINE, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 5. CONNECTICUT MUFFIN, MY TABLE, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 6. CONNECTICUT MUFFIN, JACK, 2015. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE

3.1.2. WHAT DO COFFEE SHOPS LOOK LIKE IN PARK SLOPE?

The visual surveys that follow of coffee shops in Park Slope, Brooklyn and Litchfield, Connecticut, clearly demonstrate the impacts of marketing and design studies even on small scale, local coffee shops. It seems that the research has also affected how they describe their shops. However, even large-scale national chains such as McDonalds, Dunkin' Donuts, Starbucks have tried to simulate some of these luxury features without, however, compromising profitability. Since coffee shops are an icon of upscale, gentrified urban neighborhoods, it is not surprising that a *Google* search for coffee shops in Park Slope resulted in large number along on its main commercial street of 7th Avenue.



FIG. 7. GOOGLEMAP OF COFFEE SHOPS IN PARK SLOPE, AS ACCESSED IN JANUARY 10, 2023.

My neighborhood of Park Slope, Brooklyn is a good example of that commercial semiosis as coffee shops have proliferated as the area evolved from merely gentrified in the 1980s to Super - to Hy-

per-gentrified in the 2020s. As might be expected, there is also a related Bourdieusian “necessity” to “luxury” hierarchy of coffee shops which also mimics the rationalization of making and serving of comestibles, as well as their pricing. In Park Slope, the range of coffee shops is from the low-end Dunkin’ Donuts to higher-end Poetica. In between, are Starbucks which offers a few couches, armchairs, and free Wi-Fi to customers and Connecticut Muffin. Over the decades, I have visited most of these coffee shops. Service at both Park Slope’s Dunkin’ Donuts and Starbucks takes place via modified assembly lines where one staff member takes the orders and others prepare and place the order for pick up. The difference is in terms of relative degree of decor and price. It is important to note that the highest level of coffee shops in Park Slope, such as Poetica, there is a trained “barista” who prepares the coffee from a very expensive coffee machine and who might make their personal signature symbols in the cappuccino foam. I am familiar with this personalization of service because my grandson Leander Letizia is a barista at an upscale coffee shop in a different neighborhood (See Figure 12). Expressions of genuine familiarity between customers and staff are also more likely to be observed in the higher end, less assembly line, coffee shops where staff has more time to interact with customers and can expect higher gratuities. As we have seen, in this regard, corporations, such as Starbucks, have investigated ways of simulating this sociability discussed.

This is how Poetica describes itself:

UNCOMMON GROUNDS

From the farm to your latte, our beans are meticulously selected from around the world. Whether you sip a classic drip or our signature drink, The Poetica, we aim to inspire with every drop.

AN URBAN OASIS

Step inside our warm, cozy cafés and let the world slip away. Relax in our lush, shaded yard under the blue Brooklyn skies. Let us be your

nook, a home away from home where you can work, gather, and unwind. ¹¹

It is easy to see how upscale coffee shops in very urban Park Slope are not only visually similar to each other as to the Taste of Luxury, but, as will be shown later in this essay, to those in very rural Litchfield, Connecticut.



FIG. 8. POETICA, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 9. POETICA INSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 10. COLSON PATISSERIE OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 11. COLSON PATISSERIE INSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 12. LEANDER LETIZIA'S BARISTA SIGNATURE 2023. PHOTO CREDIT LEANDER LETIZIA.

¹¹ <https://www.poeticacoffee.com/>, last accessed April 27, 2022.



FIG. 13. VARIETY COFFEE, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 15. STARBUCKS, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 14. HUNGRY GHOST, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 16. STARBUCKS, INSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT KRASE.



FIG. 17. DUNKIN' DONUTS, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 18. DUNKIN' DONUTS, INSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.

3.2. LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT

The rural upscale town of Litchfield, Connecticut presents a significant con-

trast to urban Park Slope, Brooklyn, New York. The tourist website *Visit Litchfield* describes it in this way:

Welcome to scenic, historic, and lifestyle amenity rich Litchfield, Connecticut, named a top small town destination by Smithsonian Magazine and a Top 20 weekend getaway in New England by Travel + Leisure for our rich history, scenic beauty and nature preserves, outdoor activities, shopping, dining, signature community events, and great people!

May be “on the map” nationally, but Litchfield’s charm also derives from our status as a Connecticut hidden gem, in part because many of our favorite things can seem a bit hidden; close by and popular, but also special and private¹².

In 2020, the town had a population of only 1,280 with a median household income of \$97,500 which is considerably higher than the state average of \$83,572. Like Park Slope, the largest ethnic group in Litchfield, CT are Non-Hispanic-Whites (79.7%). The absence of minorities is also indicated by the fact that none of the households reported speaking a non-English language at home as their primary shared language. However, my own observations of workplace and shopping scenes in the area is that there are many “Latino-looking” workers and shoppers. In 2020, the median property value in Litchfield, CT was \$330,000, which is considerably higher than the \$286,700 state-wide average¹³.

3.2.1. DUNKIN' DONUTS

My second most frequented coffee shop is a local franchise unit of the “Dunkin’ Donuts” national chain that is nestled in a nondescript shopping mall parking lot in Litchfield, Connecticut (See Figure 17). As opposed to Connecticut Muffin, the outside and inside appearances evoke more of Boudieu’s “taste of necessity” as opposed to luxury (See Figure 18). In addition, the Dunkin’ Donuts sign is as recognizable as McDonald’s “golden arches.” It is about a ten-minute drive from my vacation home where I

¹² <https://visitlitchfieldct.com/>

¹³ Data for this section were gathered from: <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/litchfield-ct> and <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CT,US/PST045221>, last accessed April 27, 2022.

spend most summers and many weekends. Although the town of Litchfield is very upscale and features more upscale places like Park Slope's Connecticut Muffin to have coffee in the morning, such as "At the Corner" (See Figures 23 & 24) in the town center and two more modest others, Meraki on the local highway (See Figures 25 & 26) and Espresso 59 in the town center (See Figure 27), none are open early enough in the morning for my excursion which begins before 7 AM each day. On the way to Dunkin' Donuts, I stop at a nearby gas station to buy the New York Times. My interaction with the Bangladeshi countermen begins with "good morning," How are yours, thanks after I pay with a credit card and I add Ma Salaam before driving across the highway to the shopping mall parking lot.

The service inside Dunkin' Donuts is more Fordist than the Connecticut Muffin as the normal process is for people to stand in line and place their order with the cashier who enters it into a computer from which messages are sent to others to select and package food items like donuts. A message is also sent to another worker who prepares other food such as toasting, buttering, and heating other items such as previously prepared eggs, sausages, etc... All the food items are then placed on a counter at the far end of the counter for pick up. (See Figures 21 and 22) Usually someone calls out the item such as "large black!". In contrast, at Starbucks and other more upscale, but still fast-food coffee shops, familiarity is implied because workers ask the customer for a name which they write on the paper cups before filling. Emptying refuse bins, cleaning of the inside and outside of the space is usually done by the worker with the least seniority.

Although it is a franchise that often employs seasonal workers such as high school students, over the past three or so decades I have gotten to know most of the supervisors and long-time staff. However, as the interactions are more limited due to the physical structure of the place, which at times, such as school

days, is also very busy, we don't know each other's names. Despite this lack of familiarity, we have in sense conspired to develop a routine that undermines the dehumanizing rationality of the intended McDonaldization.

Usually when I enter Dunkin' Donuts during the summer months, there are few other patrons. However, there are very long lines on school days, but I am seldom there during the school year. In every case, customers (students, teachers, workers, state police officers, etc) place their orders and take them out to their cars. When I enter, I am carrying my own large "BOSS" emblazoned coffee mug, I go quickly to my favorite table near the window and claim it by placing my newspaper on the round table top (See Figure 23). Because my cup is so noticeable, it was my entree to the team behind the counter. At first, after several consecutive days of handing it over to be filled, first the workers and then a manager, commented upon it and we began a regular exchange of greetings and occasional small talk, depending on how long the service line was. After a few weeks, in most cases I was recognized as I entered and by the time I got to the counter they have already started preparing my usual order as they take my cup and fill it with a medium refill of "midnight" (dark roast), one creamer on the side, and one slice of sour dough bread toasted with no butter. Most often the toast is in the toaster before I order it. I use the Dunkin' Donuts phone app to pay and always leave a generous \$1 cash tip.

Over the years my choice of bread for toasting has changed a few times but never the coffee. Since I am not in Connecticut year-round, sometimes there are new workers who don't know me, but I still don't have to order as one of the regular (year-round) staff or manager intervenes. It is during the summer months when I am a daily patron at Dunkin' Donuts and I am able to get to know the seasonal workers better. In several instances, I have been able to provide educational advice to high school and college stu-

dents, and some staff who are parents. It is when there is a lull in customers and I am waiting for my order at the end of the counter, that we have the opportunity to talk about our families. Apropos of family, several workers have upon occasion brought their children to the shop. Dunkin has a cozy seating area but I seldom see anyone sitting there other than the workers friends or children. I must note here that I did not ask the staff to pose for photographs as it seemed to me to be more of an imposition than at Connecticut Muffin in Brooklyn.

As at Connecticut Muffin, if I am unable to pay for any reason, such as forgetting to bring my walle, the cashier will tell me “next time,” or even “forget about it.” Even the manager has afforded me this kindness. Of course, I am not the only one who gets special treatment at Dunkin’ Donuts. Every work day there is a group of about ten men who exit from their pickup trucks and vans and occupy one or two tables. They are also recognized and greeted by the staff as they enter at the same time throughout the year. They and staff also seem to know each other’s names and have longer bouts of friendly bantering and teasing. As to sociability, being an outsider, especially a liberal New Yorker who reads the *New York Times* alone at his table in rural Connecticut is not conducive to friendly relations with these very politically conservative workmen. My acceptance to this group took several months of smiles and polite “hellos” before they responded and now give me friendly greetings.

Of might be expected, the COVID-19 Pandemic had an impact on my Litchfield coffee shop routines. Similar to Governor Andrew Cuomo in New York, on March 20, 2020, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont signed an executive order directing Connecticut businesses and residents to “Stay Safe, Stay Home.” Non-essential businesses were ordered to close and were subject to fines if they did not comply; individual citizens were not subject to fines for violating the order. The state began reducing the restric-

tions earlier than New York State on May 20, 2020. Prior to the reopening, large clear plexiglass shields were hung across all the once open counter spaces. After the gradual reopening, no sitting inside was allowed and masking was required for both staff and customers at Dunkin’ Donuts. (See Figure 24) However, many of the Pandemic-skeptical customers did not comply with the mask mandate, and due to their familiarity, if not agreement with their skepticism, with them the staff did not scold them. When sitting inside was allowed, tables were spaced more widely and I couldn’t hand my cup to a worker to fill my cup until summer 2022 when pandemic restrictions ended.



FIG. 19. DUNKIN’ DONUTS, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 20. DUNKIN’ DONUTS, INSIDE APPEARANCE, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 21. DUNKIN' DONUTS, CUSTOMERS WAITING FOR PICK-UP DURING COVID-19, 2021. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE



FIG. 23. DUNKIN' DONUTS, CT BOSS CUP AND NEW YORK TIMES AT TABLE, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 22. DUNKIN' DONUTS, DUNKIN' DONUTS, PLACING ORDER, 2022. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 24. DUNKIN' DONUTS, YES WE'RE OPEN, 2021. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE

3.2.2. WHAT DO UPSCALE COFFEE SHOPS LOOK LIKE IN LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT?

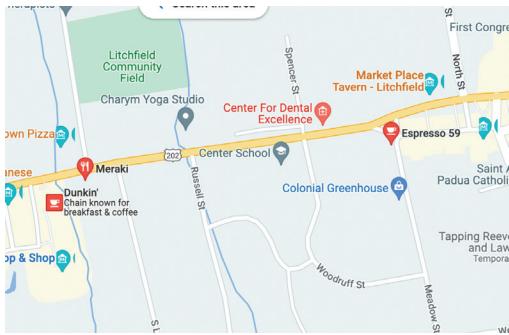


FIG. 25. GOOGLE MAP COFFEE SHOPS NEAR LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT, AS ACCESSED IN JANUARY 10, 2023

On its website, Visit Litchfield.com provides a list and descriptions of “Our favorite cups of coffee ...and more!”

Gourmet coffee, espresso drinks, teas, homemade baked goods, sweeter treats, and desserts are what we crave (right?) during pit stops when enjoying all Litchfield has to offer over the long Labor Day weekend (or anytime). Fortunately, the town is blessed many great choices, each with a distinct personality and all worth discovery and return visits¹⁴.

Included in the list are Espresso59, At the Corner, Toast & co. and Meraki. As to the lesser “taste of necessity,” it is important to note that Dunkin’ Donuts is not included as a “favorite.”

On another Connecticut tourism site, Lisa Simmons describes Espresso59 as:

This Tiny café In Connecticut Is Hidden In The Hills And Has Everything Your Heart Desires.

We love Starbucks as much as the next person, but don’t you sometimes miss the little old-fashioned cafes that have largely been taken over by corporate ownership? Something about a locally-run coffee shop is special. We are lucky enough to still have quite a few locally-owned cafes in Connecticut, and one of the best is Espresso 59. Tucked away in the beautiful Litchfield Hills, this coffee shop features stellar hot and cold drinks, pastries,

gelato, and more. Next time you need a quick sweet treat, stop by and check out their offerings! (Simmons 2022).



FIG. 26. AT THE CORNER, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 27. AT THE CORNER, INSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.

¹⁴ See <https://visitlitchfieldct.com/our-favorite-cups-of-coffee-and-more/>, accessed January 20, 2023



FIG. 28. MERAKI, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 29. MERAKI, INSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT KAREN KRASE.



FIG. 30. ESPRESSO59, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.



FIG. 31. TOAST & CO, OUTSIDE APPEARANCE, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT KAREN KRASE.



FIG. 32. TOAST & CO, ORDERING WINDOW, 2023. PHOTO CREDIT JERRY KRASE.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have written a great deal on both autoethnography (2018) and visual essays (2021b) and hope that in this visually-enhanced autoethnographic essay of my favorite coffee shops, that I have demonstrated how customers and staff are able to escape Max Weber’s dehumanizing “iron cage of rationality” by collaborating with each other to develop subversive routines that undermine the profit-driven goals of Fordism, Taylorism, and McDonaldization in their more recent forms. Admittedly, elements such as the cost and quality of the food and the exterior and interior designs add

to the ambience, scene, or even the habitus of the coffee shop. However, for me it is the feeling of being at home that I get upon entering the shop. It is a place so where everybody knows MY name – even if they really don’t – or where the familiarity is not merely scripted “meaningless sociability.” In order to make this article, more than a memoir, I anchored the contemporary upscale coffee shop scene to what I believe is its historical model in the Viennese Coffee House (*Der Wiener Kaffeehaus*). I also reviewed and integrated efforts to employ more and less recent scientific management research to simulate physical and social spaces that would effectively stimulate patrons’ feelings of being at home. The theoretical underpinning of this analysis has been provided by Jean Baudrillard, Alan Blum, Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, Ray Oldenburg, George Ritzer, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber. Their ideas have been synthesized to provide depth to the simple recounting of the routines and performances by customers and staff, as well as the similarities and difference of the visual appearances of chain and upscale coffee shops in one of Brooklyn, New York’s gentrified neighborhoods as well as exurban Litchfield, Connecticut. Finally, as gentrification seems to be a common element in discussions of coffee shops, as emergent forms of eating and drinking around the world (Halawa, Parasecoli, 2019), I would like to refer the reader to a few of my own publications that visualize the subject. (cf., for instance, Krase 2020).

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