

A chapter from Rebecca Solnit's  
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## 18 THE WORLD IN A CUP

Twenty years ago, I would hear New Yorkers, in particular, proclaim that their lives were totally separate from nature, and I'd muse that if only they would think systemically, they'd see they were in fact utterly entangled in it. This map makes visible the systems extending from a single cup of coffee, drunk in an urban café: hydraulic engineering that brings water from the mountains, water treatment plants and sewer lines that outflow to the bay and the Pacific, dairy farming, coffee importing and distributing. Documentary photographer Robert Dawson added the human side of the systems, the cafés that provide social spaces, liveliness, and community of sorts. We mapped cafés that seemed most significant to their neighborhoods or resonated for other reasons, but we left out many, many of the thousand or so that dot the city. CARTOGRAPHY: SHIZUE SEIGEL; PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBERT DAWSON — MAP

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### HOW TO GET TO ETHIOPIA FROM OCEAN BEACH

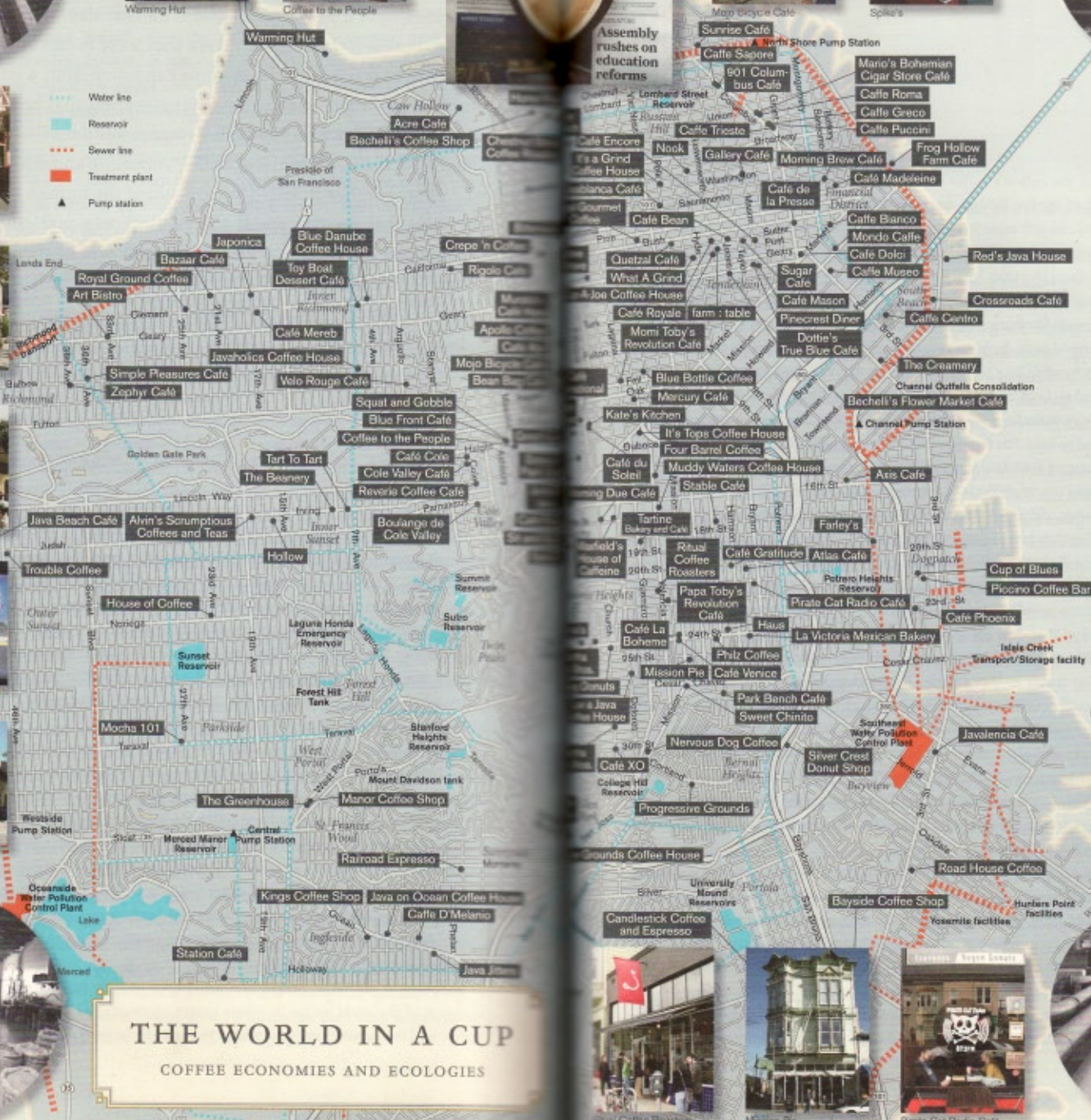
BY REBECCA SOLNIT

A café is a place where people in the neighborhood gather; a cup of coffee is where pieces of the world gather. A cup of coffee from Java Beach at the end of Judah Street at Ocean Beach is itself a remarkable map of regional and global economies. It contains water from Hetch Hetchy, the reservoir that concentrates Sierra snowmelt and feeds it downhill more than 170 miles to the faucets of San Francisco. It includes milk from the Clover Stornetta dairies in West Marin and Sonoma and organic fair-trade coffee distributed by Due Torri, which could be from Sumatra, Ethiopia, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, Costa Rica, or elsewhere, or a combination of any of these.

Which is to say that a cup of coffee from Java Beach—or indeed from any café—holds three major landscapes and economies: pastoral, alpine, and tropical. And that combination is drunk in San Francisco hundreds of thousands of times a day (though some take their coffee black). If you figure half a million cups every morning among the eight hundred thousand inhabitants, you're picturing production on a vast scale. And then there's plumbing: the story that begins in Hetch Hetchy's dammed valley inside Yosemite National Park ends with the two wastewater treatment plants that outflow into the bay and the Pacific and with the composting of coffee and filters in the city's industrial-scale composting facilities in Vacaville.

Learning to see those people and landscapes in your cup is among the demands of the world we live in, where we are constantly using, wearing, relying on, and consuming products created by forces far beyond the horizon. The







Industrial Revolution has been about alienation—not only of producers from their work but also of consumers from the source of the products they use. Much of the work of the environmental and social justice movements during the past few decades has been to make these forces visible: to see sweatshop workers when you see cheap clothes; to see child labor in some brands of chocolate; to see toil and geography, just or unjust, ugly or beautiful, in everything you touch. This knowledge brings demands that can also be pleasures. You can get to Ethiopia from Java Beach if you learn to read your coffee; and one of the big questions about fair-trade versus commercial coffee, independent cafés versus chain stores, is about drinking in meaning, or meaninglessness.

San Francisco once was and Oakland now is the port through which a huge portion of the nation's coffee flows. Years ago, when Folgers and MJB were still south of the Bay Bridge, everyone driving by smelled roasting coffee at all hours; you can still sometimes travel through that aroma on 880 in East Oakland near where the coffee is now unloaded and roasted both by big plants and by small places like Due Torri Organic Coffee Roaster, a distributor of organic fair-trade coffee. Vincent, the proprietor of Due Torri—a two-person roasting, blending, and distributing operation in a concrete bunker in a small East Oakland industrial park—told us one rainy morning he estimates that the beans have been handled by a hundred people by the time they reach your cup. In the fifty-pound sacks of coffee he receives raw from the Oakland docks, he's found many things, including jewelry, bullets, and teeth. The people behind the coffee are real to him. His family owns a finca, a coffee plantation, in Guatemala, and he grew up spending summers there.

For me, a cup of coffee is an ingathering of worlds: coffee growing in tropical highlands, dairy farming in the surrounding countryside, and hydraulic engineering that gets the water from the mountains to the plumbing and then cleans it for the sea. For Bob Dawson, the photographer for this map, the same cup of coffee, bought and drunk in a neighborhood café, is a sort of communion with the people and place around you. Of course, a cup of coffee is both, and the way that dual identity works models many other situations. In the mid-seventeenth century, London coffeehouses were intellectual and political hotbeds, so much so that Charles II considered suppressing them. But even then the coffee itself was a globalized product, coming in from the Arab world and the subtropics, part of the same colonial landscape as tea, cotton, rum, sugar, slaves, and plantations; and businessmen were conducting their deals in the coffeehouses, too. So the material coffee was most likely about exploitation and oppression, whereas the social space was about the free exchange of ideas and the growth of urban public life—early newspapers were read and passed around in these places.

San Francisco has always been a coffee town: Tadich Grill, the oldest restaurant in the city, began as a wharfside coffee stand in 1849, at the beginning of the Gold Rush, when sacks of coffee were as much a part of the wharves as the coffee factories were of the old industrial city, now lost. But the cafés that freckle the city are a relatively new phenomenon. My friend Jesse Drew reminded me that he'd lived in the Mission in the days when there were two cafés: the Picaro on Sixteenth Street and Café La Bohème on Twenty-fourth—both still open daily, but now with dozens of other coffeehouses in between. I



Café La Bohème, 2010. Photo by Robert Dawson.

also remembered the hippie-ish Café Clarion at Mission and Clarion Alley back in the early 1980s, but Jesse was right that there had once been few cafés outside North Beach. They sprang up like mushrooms after a rain in the 1980s and became a way of passing time, of visiting and working and reading and meeting. Perhaps because so many people live in small apartments, the cafés are their other living rooms; perhaps because so many lead eccentric, freelance, unsettled lives, they pass through these places all the time like migratory birds. It can be astonishing how many people seem to be at everything and anything but work on a weekday midmorning.

Sometimes I think that upscale cup of coffee with the foam poured into a little rippled heart is the last luxury a lot of the young here can afford, some of them, and they buy it still. But these are my opinions, and nearly everyone here has strong opinions about which cafés are great and which suck, just as everyone here and elsewhere has strong opinions about San Francisco as the promised land or the catchall of abominations. Whatever San Francisco once was, it is now a place identified with cafés. Other cities seem to have more domesticated citizens, citizens who go to work in the morning and go home in the evening; even in New York, cafés seem to be antithetical to the thrust of the citizens, their urgency about doing, and doing more, faster. When New Yorkers sit, they spend, in restaurants.

Perhaps the golden age of cafés has passed, for everyone now complains about the people who come into San Francisco's coffee emporia latched as if by magnetic force to their electronics, talking or typing to someone who's anywhere but here, a little oblivious to the people around them, though proximity was once the point. Even so, the café owners and workers are a society, too, and there are subgroups such as Martha and Bros., the several cafés owned by a Nicaraguan family who came here when the Sandinistas came to power—another tie to the lands where the coffee grows. Some of the cafés have gotten precious with their rites of producing the perfect artisanal cup; many have gone for more justice per cup with fair-trade organic coffee. Though Starbucks has proliferated—in 2000 there were about sixty-six outlets in San Francisco; there are now more than a hundred—it and the other chains are still in the minority, and more than a thousand versions of the neighborhood café exist in this town.

Bob Dawson has been taking photographs related to water issues in the American West for more than thirty years—and joking much of that time about a sequel featuring his beverage of choice, Coffee in the West, so he was a natural for the assignment of taking photos for this map. He set out to photograph cafés and, in the course of visiting and photographing a hundred, found that they were lenses through which he could see his familiar city—he's lived here since 1982—in a new way, neighborhood by neighborhood, and see the ways that the cafés reflect and gather their surroundings. Their very specificity is a window onto architectural variety, from elegant Victorian façades in candy colors to freestanding huts like Red's Java House or Crissy Field's Warming Hut to the thatched-cottage oddity of Java on Ocean, at Ocean Avenue and Faxon, where Supervisor John Avalos likes to meet his Excelsior District constituents. There are great landmark cafés, like the Flore at Noe and Market in the Castro; or the Puccini and, inevitably, Caffè Trieste in North Beach; cafés that come and go; innovations like the Mojo Bicycle Café on Divis, which is also a bike shop, or Pirate Cat Radio Café, which is an underground radio station. The sheer abundance of them, the vast variety, is a little overwhelming, though when a café or coffeehouse slides over into being a diner or restaurant was a philosophical question we never resolved.

Bob found the cafés moving, vital, places where people mediated being strangers and being at home. He speculates that this is because so many people have come here from elsewhere that they are trying to finish the job of arriving. Maybe home can be found at the bottom of a cup of coffee. And so can the faraway, traveling across a sea of questions —

Left: Caffè Puccini; right: Velo Rouge Café. Photos by Robert Dawson, 2010.

