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Beyond the commodity: gendered socionatures, value, and commoning in Mexican coffee plots

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, women are the producers of many agricultural commodities around the world and feminist scholars astutely argue that women subsidize global agricultural production because the exchange value attributed to their products in commodity chains does not fairly compensate them. Although this is the case with women's smallholder coffee in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, in this paper we seek to move beyond an analysis of value and exploitation based on the commodity (in this case, coffee) to explore more fully women's production practices. Drawing on debates over the question of value production in socionatures, we suggest that as women cultivate coffee, they also create socionatural spaces in which they produce and valorise a host of things and relations. Literature on diverse economies, Latin American theorizations of *lo común* (the common), and feminist political ecology help us examine how women also generate a multiplicity of values that exceeds their fraught relationship with global commodity chains. This perspective enables us to expand the way we understand women producers, seeing them simultaneously as subjects exploited by value extraction through the commodity chain to political actors engaging with other forms of valuing and promoting life.

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Introduction

We arrive at Julia's coffee plot, high in the southern mountains of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, after a long walk. Julia unlatches the door to her hut and pulls out small benches, offering them to our research team, while her sister gathers some ripe bananas. Her granddaughters run off to play in the stream. Julia shows us the different plants she has and explains how they got there:

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the coffee her father planted decades ago, the herbs that grow wild and are good for stomach pains, a flower grown for beauty's sake, and the mango tree she recently planted. She and her sister talk about the community assembly yesterday and share tips on which herbs cure headaches. After an hour or so, Julie gathers some greens to take home for lunch, and pauses to listen to birdsong. She smiles and says, 'I love it here.'

Production of coffee began in Oaxaca in the 1850s on large plantations; today it is dominated by smallholders that mostly grow organic, fair trade beans for export (Jaffee 2007; González Pérez 2012; Fowler-Salamini and Vaughan 1994). These producers live in small villages dotting two main mountain ranges that generate the sub-tropical, high-altitude climate required to grow quality coffee. When the state-run coffee institute was dismantled *via* neoliberal reforms in the late 1980s, smallholders created regional producer organizations to sell coffee and broker access to government support (Hernández Navarro and Celis Callejas 1992). Although women have always worked in coffee, data from producer surveys and organic coffee certification processes indicates a recent gendered shift in production: women have increasingly become coffee 'farm operators' instead of men, increasing from as little as 10% to as much as 70% of the membership in coffee organizations (Lyon, Bezaury, and Mutersbaugh 2010).

Initially, we sought to study the feminisation of coffee production from the lens of gendered commodity chains, which has demonstrated how women's labour in the Global South increasingly subsidizes the production of manufacturing and agricultural goods (Dunaway 2013a; Deere 2005). This scholarship argues that women are exploited in labour-intensive production jobs in the lowest-value-added segments of the commodity chain (World Bank Group 2019) while their reproductive labour is expropriated through subsistence strategies in semi-proletarianized households (Collins 2013; Dunaway 2013b). It demonstrates how women's work is regularly undervalued, despite the fact that it often generates quality in agricultural goods (Barrientos 2014). Our work has contributed to these discussions by exploring how women's shift into farm operator roles in coffee organizations simultaneously strengthened some aspects of their economic autonomy while burdening them with new administrative labours (Lyon, Mutersbaugh, and Worthen 2017, 2019).

However, we have felt somewhat dissatisfied with our analyses. This is because much of what we narrated in the scene above—the work, the social relations, the relation with the nonhuman—is left out of the picture when we limit our discussions of value and production to the commodity chain. This is in part because of the particular situation in which smallholder coffee is produced in Oaxaca, namely, in agrarian spaces articulated by common property, communal labour, and collective governance, often seen as an alternative to capitalist formations (Félix 2004). We began to wonder: how could we hold in tension the space of the coffee plot as both a site of

production for global commodity chains *and* a site that produces something more?

We draw on recent debates over the question of value production in socionatures (Andueza 2021; Kay and Kenney-Lazar 2017; Huber 2018) to suggest that one way forward is to explore coffee plots as socionatural spaces in which multiple forms of value are produced. While much of this literature has focused on nature within capitalist value formations, a growing line of inquiry explores ‘value beyond capitalist natures’ (Kay and Kenney-Lazar 2017, 304). Agricultural commodity chains have served as a way into this question, particularly inspiring explorations of ‘how nonhuman relations and ecological differences shape inclusions and exclusions in commodity chains’ and produce socionatures that are articulated to capitalist production but also exceed it (Bair and Werner 2011, 996, see also Tsing 2015).

To these conversations, we add a discussion of gendered aspects of the socionatures produced within alternative value formations. To do so, we draw on several strands of contemporary feminist scholarship, specifically Latin American theorizations of the gendered aspects of *lo común* (the commons) (Gutiérrez 2015; Navarro 2013), as well as the importance of nonhuman life in feminist political ecology (Braidotti 2017; Soto-Alarcón 2022; Bear et al. 2015). Particularly, we argue that multiple types of value are created within the socionatures of women’s coffee plots, including exchange value, use value, social value, and affective value. While some of these value forms are captured by the coffee commodity chain, others exceed these chains and contribute instead to reproducing life within Oaxacan communal systems. This perspective enables us to radically rethink how we have analysed women producers—from subjects exploited by value extraction to political actors engaged in valuing and promoting life. Through an expanded conversation on questions of value, socionatures, and production, we suggest new approaches to analyse gendered agricultural value production and the feminisation of agriculture.

Research methods

We began this project in 2015 and continued until research was halted by the pandemic in 2020. Overall, we worked in twenty-one coffee-producing communities located in four different regions in the state of Oaxaca, all of which are common property communities self-governed through communal labour relations. We conducted 489 surveys and 116 life histories with coffee producers, approximately half women, half men. Surveys focused on gender dynamics and personal histories related to agricultural production across homes, plots, coffee organizations, and communities. We also conducted 11 focus groups (divided by gender) with members of coffee organizations to explore gendered dynamics of organizational labour and participation.

Additionally, to understand the production of socionatures, we conducted interviews on plant-people relationships with 21 women and 21 men from four different villages and assessed biomass and biodiversity in 50m x 20m vegetational transects in each of their coffee plots.

Rethinking value production in coffee plots

Rethinking value has been a key part of the shift away from the concept of the 'commodity chain' and toward that of a 'production network' (Coe, Dicken, and Hess 2008). As McGrath (2018) posits, the two main approaches to value in commodity chain literature—Marxian value theories and economic rent—are being expanded to explore how value is differently determined in specific social contexts. Similarly, multiple scholars have argued for a rethinking of commodity chains not as stable entities, but rather as sifting articulations of exclusions and inclusions of people, places, and production processes (Bair and Werner 2011). This opens analysis of commodity chains to include that which at any given moment may be in excess of capitalist value capture along the chain, but that nevertheless participates in the conditions of chain-making. Indeed, Tsing (2015) argues that chains operate along 'sites in which both capitalist and noncapitalist value forms may flourish simultaneously' (301).

To explore the abundance of life, land, and labour in coffee plots that go beyond the exchange value of harvested coffee beans, we take inspiration from the diverse economies literature, which has importantly explored the multiple ways people create economic relations that are not exclusively centred on capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2006; Naylor and Thayer 2022). We engage with this literature to suggest that there are numerous ways to think about value; for example, as a measurement of want (in economics) or as a social/cultural definition of something desirable (in anthropology, sociology); the degree of some type of desired quality (in ethics and aesthetics); or as representation (in semiotics or mathematics) (Grossberg 2010). We employ a broader definition of value based on practices, or 'the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated into some larger, social totality' (Graeber 2001, xii; see also Grossberg 2010). As Lee (2006, 416) writes, '...the point is to discover how value is valued through social practice. Like the economic practices through which it is created, circulated and consumed, value is geographically and historically variable.' Consequently, understandings of value are dependent upon their formulation within different social configurations.

We take this premise and use it to engage with literature that increasingly explores value production in socionatures (Kay and Kenney-Lazar 2017; Andueza 2021; Huber 2018). This scholarship has importantly interrogated the relationship between socionatures and capitalism, taking seriously the

question of whether ‘nature’, in addition to labour, creates value (Moore 2015; Batubara 2021). This has led to theorizations about the relationships between ‘nature’ and historically situated forms of capitalism, and to the recognition that other forms of value—not just capitalist value systems—operate in socrionatural spaces (Bear et al. 2015). A way into these questions has been to explore how commodities are not only produced differently, but also valorised differently *across* value formations. For example, Johnson (2017, 321) illuminates how a camel’s articulation to capitalist value formation does not disqualify it from being simultaneously valorised in other ways, arguing that a camel in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia is ‘walking into and out of the frame of capitalist relations...all while holding enormous subsistence and cultural-symbolic value’.

Similarly, for Faier (2011, 1094), matsutake mushroom ‘commodity relations emerge in the intersections and gaps among diverse and differently positioned human-nonhuman worlds’, arguing that ‘when we pay attention to these dynamics, we can see that commodity exchange is the product of contingent and uneasy relationships among differently situated natural-cultural ecologies, and the discrepant ways people are positioned within and relate to them’ (1094). Tsing (2015, 301), who also works with Faier, understands the matasuke commodity value chains through the concept of ‘salvage accumulation’, a process through which ‘value created in noncapitalist value forms is translated into capitalist assets’ within ‘peri-capitalist...sites in which both capitalist and noncapitalist value forms may flourish simultaneously’. Bear et al. (2015, n.p.) deploy the term ‘conversion’ to denote ‘heterogeneous processes through which people, labour, sentiments, plants, animals, and life-ways are converted into resources for various projects of production’. Yet these conversions—which can take the form of ‘money, contracts, audit, yield curves, and financial models’ in capitalist value formations—are not always complete or coherent: ‘the life-world, as well as the processes and outcomes of these conversions, can remain divergent’ (n.p.), and labour and value production can be subsumed to capitalist value extraction at the same time that it also participates in other value formations. This enables us to hold in tension the space of the coffee plot as both a site for the extraction of value for global commodity chains *and* a site of labour and value creation within alternative life projects, without romanticizing non-capitalist value formations (Naylor and Thayer 2022; Bledsoe, McCreary, and Wright 2022).

But how do we understand values produced across divergent value formations when these are rooted in communal lifeways, including common property, communal labour, and collective-governance structures such as those found in Oaxaca? Here, drawing on critiques of the eurocentrism of diverse economies literature (Bledsoe, McCreary, and Wright 2022; Naylor and Thayer 2022), we turn to scholarship from Indigenous epistemologies in the Americas that explores questions of *buen vivir* (the ‘good life’) (Simpson 2011; Acosta

and Martínez 2009) and responses to the ‘crisis of life’, or the violence and destruction wrought by modernity. Conceptualizations of *buen vivir* reflect Indigenous worldview based on living life well, or ‘life in plenitude’ (Huanacuni Mamani 2010) in which the purpose of life is to promote more life (Walsh 2010; Acosta and Martínez 2009; Cardoso-Ruiz et al. 2016).

Latin American autonomous feminist scholarship has likewise explored how life in plenitude can be realized (Tapia González 2018). Combining Indigenous communitarian epistemologies and feminist reflections on social reproductive labour, this work explores the production of *lo común*, a type of Latin American commoning (Gutiérrez 2015; Navarro 2013; Tzul Tzul 2015). *Lo común* is part of the ‘ever-renewing impulse to reproduce human and non-human life’ (Gutiérrez Aguilar, Linsalata, and Navarro Trujillo 2016, 88). As with other conceptualizations of commoning (Clement et al. 2019; Nightingale 2019; Gibson, Cameron, and Healy 2016), *lo común* is not necessarily a thing as such—shared land, for example—but rather a relational process that produces value, community, and political subjectivities through the process of ‘sharing a property, a practice, or a knowledge’ (Sato and Soto Alarcón 2019, 38).

Accordingly, engaging in *lo común* creates a collective political subject by participating in daily tasks of subsistence that help reproduce human and nonhuman life. In colonial contexts of violence and expropriation this becomes an act of radical politics. Mora’s research in Zapatista communities demonstrates this:

Autonomy as the foundation of life politics thus is expressed in gathering fallen branches for firewood, in harvesting corn in the fields, in praying for abundant water....in collecting edible leaves in the forest or picking vegetables in the backyard gardens, in taking care of the children and the elderly....It is the sum of activities in such arenas that allows for the dignified reproduction of life...daily life becomes inseparable from the political, while imbricating materiality in a collective sense of belonging and self-making. (2014, 19-21)

Yet it is important to understand these spaces of gathering not as romanticized worlds of otherness. Indeed, the concept of *lo común* importantly places commoning within the power relations of colonial modernity, arguing that it is made ‘from below, at the margins, or against the capitalist social relations, and around the material reproduction of life and the search for a dignified existence’ (Gutiérrez Aguilar, Linsalata, and Navarro Trujillo 2016, 85). In this sense, ‘living becomes a political act in itself in that it ensures the sociocultural and biological continuation of life’ (Mora 2017, 19).

We want to build upon several aspects of the conversation emerging around *lo común*. Following various feminist political ecologists (Collard, Dempsey, and Sundberg 2015; Di Chiro 2008; Ojeda et al. 2022), we emphasize that the political act of living includes the creation of socio-natures (Swyngedouw 1996; Castree and Braun 2001), or spaces in which

nature and the social are co-constituted through interactions with the nonhuman through various practices such as cultivation, gathering, or enjoyment. All of this creates ‘a set of more-than-human, contingent relations-in-the-making that result in collective practices of production, exchange and living with the world’ (Nightingale 2019, 19). Importantly, the creation of socialnatural spaces also generates ‘affective socio-nature relations’ as life is created within plenitude (Singh 2017, 754). In other words, emotions and feelings *about* coffee plots are key to their valorisation.

Taken together, literatures on value, socionatures, and *lo común* helps us to recast what we see in women’s coffee plots and thus to centre the reproduction of human and nonhuman life, rather than the commodified bean, as the motor force of women’s activities. We can then examine how women’s activities in coffee spaces—friendship, labour exchanges, interaction with plants and animals—generate an abundance of values that are instrumental to engendering affective relationships of collective-becoming and alternative value formation within Oaxacan communal lifeways.

Creating socionatures and value in oaxacan coffee farms

In our Oaxacan research, women’s socionatural spaces are situated on communal territories characterized by communally-held land, communal labour, and collective governance. No single term can do justice to the diversity and complexity of collective governance. We use the term ‘communal lifeways’ to describe the diverse practices that attend the interplay of labour, land, socio-nature, and values; ‘communal governance’ in reference to formal (e.g. assemblies) and informal (e.g. *fiestas*) political institutions; and finally ‘(normative) communal systems’ to denote structural relations between communal land, labour, and local citizenship codified during the *longue durée* of communal engagements with colonial, post-colonial, and precolonial Mexican states (Smyth 2024, Félix 2004, Nader 1990). Similar communal arrangements are commonplace across Latin American Indigenous and Afro-descendant regions and particularly relevant to Oaxaca, where approximately 80% of all the state’s territory is collectively held as *ejidos* or *tierra comunal*. The former refers to lands recovered from large landowners after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and the latter to Indigenous communities with colonial decrees to their lands (Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Rural Sostenible y la Soberanía Alimentaria 2015). In Oaxacan communities, individual agricultural land-use (usufruct) is limited to communal citizens and governed by community assemblies: local citizenship requires labour participation in collective work parties (*tequios*), ritual events (*fiestas*), and administrative tasks (*cargos*) in exchange for land access and a say in assembly decisions regarding usufruct norms, community asset distributions, and jurisprudence (Nader 1990).

Communal governance is highly structured, but as Oaxacan intellectuals Floriberto Díaz and Jaime Martínez Luna demonstrate, it also enables alternative forms of political life and co-existence with the natural and social world in Oaxacan villages (Cardoso Jiménez and Robles Hernández 2007; Martínez Luna 2010). Moreover, as Worthen (2012) shows, it enables alternative value formations that engage with and yet supersede capitalist value extraction. Indeed, as an expression of *lo común*, communal governance undergirds collective practices that centre the reproduction of a human and nonhuman life.

However, it is important to note that power and inequality manifest themselves within communal governance, often along gendered lines (Tapia González 2018). In study communities, gender inequality stems from the fact that full communal citizenship is based on a household model of representation. Normatively, men are assumed to represent their family unit in assemblies, *tequios*, and *cargos*, while women conduct reproductive work in households and fields that, according to these norms, allows men to allocate labour and time to sustain the communal infrastructure. However, while men's *cargo* and *tequio* labour builds prestige and authority, women's reproductive labour does not—even when women increasingly perform *cargos* and *tequios*, for example in community health clinics or schools. Conversely, women's collective reproductive work tends to be made socially visible (solely) in *fiesta* spaces, where they are in charge of running the communal kitchen and conducting specific religious rituals, spaces where they solidify social relationships, exchange knowledge, and generate prestige (Stephen 2005; Gil and Elena 2019; Curiel 2019).

Coffee plots also, like *fiesta* spaces, provide women with unique opportunities. Within Oaxacan communes, coffee parcels provide permanent, year-round agricultural spaces deemed appropriate for women to inhabit and organise without male mediation. This is in part because coffee is seen as a crop suitable for women. As Patricia, a participant in our life histories, said, 'Coffee doesn't have thorns [like pineapple fields do]; I can definitely handle it. I can't do pineapple, but I can sure do coffee!' As a key subsistence crop, maize land and maize cultivation—typically slash and burn—is normatively tied to masculinity (Vázquez García and Flores 2002); beans, the other key subsistence crop, does provide women's spaces, but these are only temporary seasonal swiddens that can shift location each year.

Coffee, though, is different. A perennial crop living 30 or more years, coffee agroforestry is normatively viewed as appropriate to women (Celis and Nuria 2017; Cárcamo Toalá et al. 2010). Our research indicates that coffee plots—more than other land types—are given directly to women, often as an inheritance from their parents. This was underscored by the sentiments of Jaime, a father passing on coffee land to a soon-to-be-wed daughter: 'This land belongs to my daughter; if [the husband] leaves her she will still own it and my grandchildren will inherit. It's important that daughters have their

own land.' Indeed, as one woman told us, it is common that, 'Each person has their own plot. The man's coffee plot is not the same as the woman's, they each have their own.'

Given this, we suggest that agrarian relations within socionatural spaces may be an overlooked area of gendered communal lifeways. By engaging in collective cultivation women not only produce coffee, they *reproduce* human and nonhuman life. As women have assumed formal farm operator positions within coffee organizations, their ability to support vibrant communal-reproductive economies has also increased. Accordingly, we seek to explore (i.) how women cultivate socionatures within coffee plots, (ii.) how cultivated socionatures transcend individual farm management decisions to constitute community-wide agrarian practices, and (iii.) how collective practices and socionatures become valorised within communal lifeways. To do this, we explore four types of value production within women's coffee plots: use values, exchange values, social values, and affective values.

Use and exchange value: food and medicinal plants

Women cultivate coffee differently than men. Women's plots, as we detail below, are distinct in appearance, indicating a preference for cultivation of a wider array of use values such as food and medicinal herbs. Relative to men's plots, women's plots are more open, less brushy, and show a greater intensity in the production of non-coffee plants. As a result, women's plots also are likely to have fewer trees, especially smaller-diameter trees, and plots are less carbon-dense (fewer cubic meters of standing timber per unit area) because women have thinned out the overgrowth. Men's plots, by contrast, have a greater orientation to coffee-only production, with more biomass but less agrobiodiversity.

A striking aspect of coffee plots—for both women *and* men—is presented in the sheer number of use values produced. Our data indicate that both women and men farmers propagate a wide variety of plants intercropped among coffee, yet women produce more food and medicinal plants in their plots than men. This is evident in [Chart 1](#), which shows that food and medicinals make up 52.8% of the total plants found in women's coffee plot transects, while just 38.8% of those found in men's. Additionally, even though women's plots have less trees overall than men's, the trees they do have are more likely to produce food. [Chart 2](#) shows that women have a significantly greater share of tree crop species such as the edible legume cuajinicuil (*Inga spp*), banana varieties, and other tree foods and fruit (e.g. *Cestrum nocturnum*, citrus, avocados, mangos). They are also more likely to have beans, corn, sugarcane, yucca, and other food crops interspersed among coffee and shade trees.

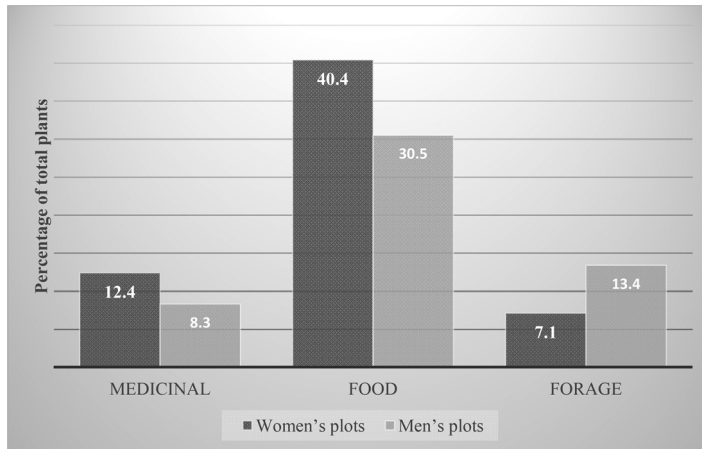


Chart 1. Percentage of total plants (other than coffee) in coffee plot transects that have food, medicinal, or forage value: men's versus women's plots.

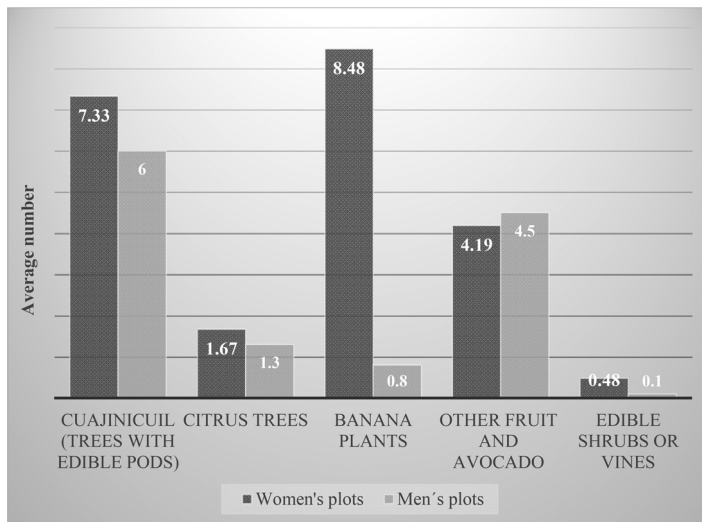


Chart 2. Average number of tree types in coffee plot transects: men's versus women's plots

We understand these differences between men and women's plots to reflect gendered divisions of care and labour. Women reported in our interviews that they are responsible for putting food on the table, either through production, exchange, or sale of edible plants. The coffee plot is part of a larger food security strategy that includes their home gardens and other agricultural plots. When asked if her husband helps with food cultivation, Elvira responded, 'No, I plant it because it is what I need in the kitchen.' Other women indicated how the coffee plot aided them in making sure they had enough to eat. Estela recounted how for many years without a coffee plot she suffered—not only did she not have coffee income, but she did not have

a space in which to plant other food crops. She is grateful to have a plot now, as it also means sustenance:

Before we didn't have corn, beans, or sugar. It was a sad life. But now I can say I am a woman because I have what I need at hand. Because the first thing I need in the morning is my coffee and my sugar. Then I put on my *nixtamal* [corn] to make my tortillas. Then I have my warm beans. And now I am eating!

For Rosa, the edible herbs that grow wild in the plot sustain her work in the field: 'Sometimes I don't take anything to [the coffee plot] to eat, just some salt. And then we eat the *verdolagas* while we work. It's tasty!'

Beyond subsistence, what can one day be an item important for its use value can the next day be a source of exchange. Fruit trees are key. Virginia explained: 'I want to plant fruit trees so that they can grow, and we have fruit to eat—bananas and avocados—also so that I can sell them!' Eufrosina decided to plant *chepil*, an edible herb. Even though it grows wild, she wanted to have a more secure source for sustenance and sale: 'Since my husband doesn't have a steady salary, we must find a way to generate more income. So, whatever we plant, we save some for us to eat and the other part to sell.' Another woman said that when she has leftover food crops like greens or vegetables, she sells them: 'And that is how I get a little bit of money. I make the money stretch because I look for food—*quelites*, herbs, or vegetables—I like to take advantage of what grows here...We scrape by with what we can find.'

Additionally, women are largely responsible for curing illnesses in areas where hospitals or clinics are often far away. As Sirenia indicated, friends and family members 'taught me when I had my children. I cured them almost entirely with medicinal herbs.' Several women indicated that coffee plots served as a type of pharmacy. Eufrosina explained that one plant, *botonchiuite*, which is excellent for rash or fevers, grows in her coffee plots: 'for example, if one of the kids were to suddenly get sick, I'd run to the coffee plot to gather a handful. Then I'd boil it and bathe him with it before bed.'

Although women cultivate food and medicine in their individual plots, they emphasized that depending on what one needs, it is acceptable to gather herbs or fruits from other people's land. Juana described the social agreements governing food gathering:

If it is a vine, like *huele de noche* or *pazontle*, well that grows wild wherever, so if you see that, wherever it is, you can cut it...And if it is mango or mamey [a fruit] season, if you have a craving for a fruit, you can pick it up and eat it or take it. *Verdolaga* grows out in the fields, you can cut it. But, for example, you can't cut someone's coffee. Bananas you can sometimes: if it is ripe and this [indicates with fingers] long then anyone can take it, but if it is green, then you cannot. But in that case, you can ask to cut it, and if you ask, people will give.

According to this logic, tending one's coffee plot in a way that enables the growth of natural herbs, greens, and fruit thus serves as a food reserve for everyone.

Yet it is important in this configuration to not lose sight of the coffee plant itself: coffee generates both use value and money. As such, it is a key element of local economies. As Lucía said, 'only coffee maintains us once it is harvested. From that money we buy our shoes, clothes—everything—soap, lime. Everything that doesn't naturally grow here.' Thus, coffee plots are socio-natural spaces that enable women to cultivate a variety of food and medicinal plants, with both use and exchange value, that can be shared across the community. In this sense, they simultaneously sustain nonhuman and human life.

Social value: collective labour

Sandra: In coffee work, we do labour exchanges to pick coffee and when we go to a plot it fills with women.

Leonarda: A lot!

Sandra: Men just do brush removal, but we try to return the labour that was given—or that was received—we all go to work to help ourselves.

Leonarda: To give back!

Sandra: It's especially nice when people make food in the coffee plot for everyone to eat. It looks pretty. Turkey or what is provided, some even give a bit of mezcal. In our community, this is the work of people who help each other.

Leonarda: It's beautiful when one goes to the plot to work.

Sandra: And women are braver when they are together.

As Sandra and Leonarda suggest, our research found that women, relative to men, more frequently utilize their plots as spaces for social gathering and collective work. This was indicated in several ways.

First, women more regularly go to plots with other people: children, husbands, friends, family members, or paid labourers. Indeed, in [Chart 3](#) we draw on survey data to find that women are more hesitant to go to their coffee plots alone. 32% of women versus 6% of men never go to their most distant coffee plot unaccompanied. On the one hand, as those mainly responsible for childcare, women are often *not* alone, and children regularly go with them to coffee plots. Social norms also make it strange for women to be out and about on their own. Additionally, fear of violence against women often motivates them to seek companionship. Yet another reason has to do with their need for labour. Women's plots require more labour than men's because of the cultivation of other food and medicinal crops within them. This means that women need to mobilize labour to engage in brush reduction so they can plant other things.

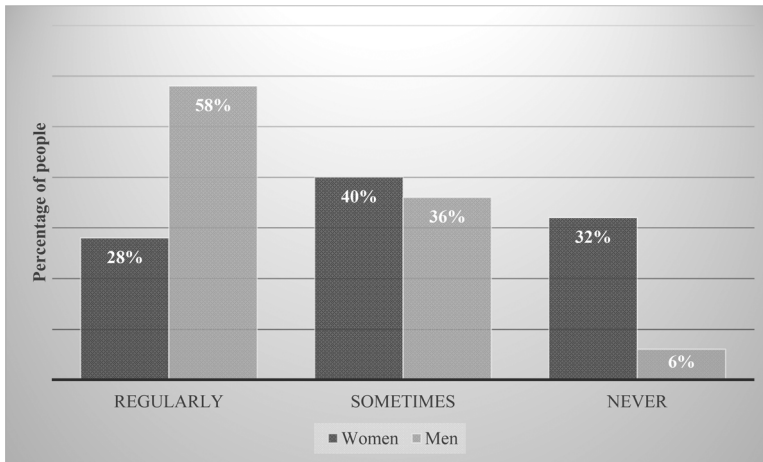


Chart 3. Percentage of women versus men who go to their most distant coffee plot alone.

Table 1. Number and percentages of women versus men who participated in labour exchanges in the last coffee cycle (broken down by tasks).

	Production Task					
	Shade regulation	Pruning	1st brush clearing	2nd brush clearing	Planting	Picking
Number of women (out of $n=250$)	23 (9%)	23 (9%)	35 (14%)	34 (14%)	17 (7%)	77 (31%)
Number of men (out of $n=239$)	8 (3%)	10 (4%)	29 (12%)	22 (9%)	11 (5%)	41 (17%)

Labour tasks in coffee plots are importantly differentiated by gender. The tasks represented as most suited to men are those that are considered physically demanding, such as shade regulation and pruning in which tree branches must be cut and removed. The *limpia*, or brush and weed clearing, is also a task that is ideally performed by a man. As a result, most women try to mobilize a male family member's labour power to help with these activities. As one woman told us: 'the woman goes to the coffee plot to see how it is doing and then she tells her husband how he needs to go clean it.' However, almost 40% of the women we interviewed were single, widowed, or had spouses who lived elsewhere. They sought to leverage the labour power of other male family members, but when that was insufficient, they hired day labourers. Yet this can be cost prohibitive. As Flavia told us, 'If we don't use labourers, we have more money. The times I have just worked with all my children in the plot is when the money covers clothes and food for the whole year.'

Accordingly, we found that women engage more in reciprocal work relationships (I help you today, you help me tomorrow) than men do. [Table 1](#)

shows a comparison between percentage of men versus women who engaged in labour exchanges for main production tasks. This is evident across all tasks, but especially during the harvest, where 31% of women versus 17% of surveyed men indicated participating in labour exchanges. As Josefina told us, ‘We work *via guelaguetza* [Zapoteco word for exchange of gifts or services]. For example, if you have work that needs to be done, we go do your work, but then a different day we do work in my plot.’ Overall, our data support the idea that women tend to participate in group labour in their coffee plots, while men are more likely to undertake their tasks alone.

This is important because it creates *socionatures* through which relationships are built and strengthened. Collective labour is a way of sharing knowledge in communal lifeways (Cardoso Jiménez and Robles Hernández 2007). Through working together, people are taught certain skills: a show-by-doing that helps people learn how to work, but that also teaches good conduct and collective values. Similarly, as they work, people are also observed—their temperament, their attitude, their adaptability—are all analysed. This is often taken into account when choosing group leaders, an idea epitomized in the phrase *mandar obediciendo* (to lead by obeying) (Mora 2017). As such, labouring collectively in coffee plots and coffee organizations, much like working in community kitchens (Curiel 2019), provides women with a path toward social recognition.

Collective habitation of coffee spaces and working together also generates an important relationship with the nonhuman. During work parties, participants learn what plants are good for what ailments, how plants relate to other plants (in terms of shade and soil needs), and how to manage pests or encourage pollinators. For example, Emma told us that an herb called *yalá*, which grows wild in the coffee plot, is helpful for treating migraines. When we asked her how she learned about it, she responded, ‘with my friends. They showed me how to grab the leaf, put it on your forehead, and tie a string around it to keep it in place.’ Another woman, Raquel, told us that working in coffee parcels with others is ‘beautiful, because it’s a way to learn many things and have new experiences.’ Thus, collective labour in coffee plots creates social value in addition to use and exchange values. This in turn creates and maintains relationships of labour and knowledge that reproduce *lo común*.

Affective value: coffee plots as refuge and enjoyment

Socionatures in coffee plots also create affective values. Although producing coffee is difficult, many women indicated that the plot was a happy place. Virginia told us how the town is noisy, but in the coffee parcels ‘everything is peaceful.’ Another woman told us, ‘My plot has always provided enjoyment. When I’m in my house I’m overtaken by sadness, and this plot has

always allowed me to forget my worries...and recover my energy.' Yet another said, 'I feel happier when I arrive in my coffee plot, my problems are forgotten.'

Many women agreed that enjoying not just the coffee parcel, but also the work done in the parcel provided a way to 'distract' oneself from other problems:

Woman 1: The only nice thing about harvesting coffee is that you distract yourself, you relax out there, and forget about your problems because you are working and whether you realize it or not, it helps you calm down.

Woman 2: It takes away your stress!

Centola even described how she uses the coffee plot as a space to express her frustration. She chops dead branches into pieces 'to get out my anger.'

Relationships with the coffee plants are also key to enjoying the coffee plot. Again, a focus group conversation illustrates this:

Woman 2: For me, the nice part [about coffee] is how the plant looks.

Woman 3: When it is bearing fruit, the plant is pretty.

Woman 4: And when the plant is full of cherries, you say, wow, my coffee is beautiful!

Woman 5: And it motivates you to work more.

Woman 6: At the end of the day when you have to leave the plot you don't want to leave the plant there alone, because you see it and say...

Woman 1: [interrupting] When the plant is really pretty...

Woman 2: Yes, you want to hurry and pick it [the coffee cherries].

Woman 4: When it is full of cherries!

Woman 6: And then it's like, let's go home, and you're like, geez, I don't want to leave!

Woman 5: You have to leave it there and return the next day.

Woman 6: Yes, these are beautiful experiences sometimes, and even if the plant doesn't have a lot of cherries, you still want to go to the coffee plot and see it.

Woman 5: Yes, you say well, I better come back tomorrow.

Woman 6: Those are nice experiences. The difficult part is attending to the plant, because sometimes the price for coffee is low. But yes, we have affection for our coffee plants.

Many women talked about caring for 'pretty' coffee plants in a loving, careful way. Angela talked about 'attending' to the coffee, a word often used to refer to welcoming and caring for guests: 'To make the plant pretty you have to attend to it, plant it, give it shade—plant a tree or a banana plant next to it, or a lime or orange tree so that it helps it out.' For Lucía, 'it's like a baby, you always must make sure it's not wet so that it doesn't get irritated. That's the way the plants are, like a human. Because you know, that's your livelihood.'

Additionally, producing nice coffee beans and consuming them also gives a feeling of satisfaction and comfort:

Woman 2: You can drink your coffee with confidence because the coffee is from your plot. That to me is really nice. You know where it came from. Instead of buying Nescafé [Nestle's powdered coffee], which could come from beans that are burned.

Woman 3: That's why it tastes bad.

Woman 5: Yes, but if you drink your own coffee, you know that it is yours.

This provides an expanded way to think of plenitude and difference in socio-natures: production of the bean, destined for the commodity chain, also makes possible the realization of a fullness of life in additional affective registers. Love for the plants and the socio-natures they create in coffee plots inspires women to want to cultivate coffee and other plants, as well as inhabit these spaces. The emotional value they give to plots is an important part of wanting to reproduce them.

Yet women also understand that the enjoyment of their plots has a greater importance. Angela related how caring for her coffee plots is caring for life, broadly understood:

Plants are living beings...because without trees, there is no vegetation, and where there is a tree, there is everything. We here are rich in vegetation because in the city it is hot and there is no foliage, there is nothing, not even shade. And here all over the place there is shade and vegetation. The environment here is the most beautiful thing we have in my opinion, and all of that helps, it brings us life, and I think that is good too.

As Rosa told us:

From my point of view what we need to take care of is the *campo* [countryside] because here we have all the oxygen that we need. If we don't take care of the *campo*, we lose everything. And we have already lived, but we think about the future for our children, not about us, because I say to my kids, I already lived. I've already known the world, but my children have not.

This quote summarizes much of what women shared with us about coffee plot cultivation. Women are creating use values through food and medicine, spaces for respite, care, and enjoyment, and strengthening human and non-human bonds through work parties. They are reproducing life.

Conclusion

I harvested a bunch of avocados in my coffee plot. I was giving, giving, giving them away because it is the first year that tree bore fruit! Next year I'll sell the avocados, but I like to give them away to people. Take one and plant the seed because then it will give you a lot! I bring a little basket [to the coffee plot where the avocado tree is] and fill it, because they are heavy and that's all I can carry. Some people sell avocados, others give them away. I gave them all away this year.

We end with this interview quote from Carmela because it demonstrates so much of what women's coffee production generates. Beyond the coffee beans converted into exchange value within global commodity chains, *socionatures* are created. This multi-layered cornucopia of use values, exchange values, social and affective values operate and are valorised through the reproduction of communal lifeways. The avocado tree provides shade for the coffee plant and creates a better harvest, and it is hoped that this harvest will bring much needed cash income through its sale in certified organic coffee markets. Yet even if that does not happen, the avocados themselves may be eaten, sold, exchanged, or given away: the value they are given depends upon each relationship in which they are embedded. Carmela even tells the people to whom she gives them that they should take the pit and plant their own tree, sharing knowledge and the opportunity to have abundance. This all brings Carmela joy.

Carmela's avocados allow us to see how *socionatures* created in women's coffee plots generate other forms of value that exceed processes of 'conversion' within global commodity chains (Tsing 2015). This is not to romanticize *lo común*, but rather to understand it in interrelation with capitalist formations: sometimes subsidizing them yet also exceeding them in important ways. Therefore, we hope this study contributes to examinations of value production in *socionatures* and particularly the question of 'value beyond capitalist natures' (Kay and Kenney-Lazar 2017). We also hope to inspire new approaches to studying gendered agricultural commodity chains and the feminisation of agriculture that take an expanded view on questions of value, *socionatures*, and production. Exploring how women producers like Carmela enliven spaces with energy, labour, and affect to create multiple forms of value positions them not just as exploited producers of agricultural goods, but also as political actors who help reproduce life, alternative value systems, and in this case, Oaxacan communal lifeways. It is important to continue exploring what the 'more' is that women produce in relation to the commodity chain, not only to challenge capitalocentric forms of knowledge production, but also to support epistemologies and ontologies of value that centre life.

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