Homework Questions for ***Javatrekker: Dispatches from the World of Fair Trade Coffee***

**Directions:** I am going to collect this as homework this time, so please choose THREE and type up your responses (just a few sentences each question should cover it).

1. This book is a work of research, in a sense, though the **sources are not cited formally,** except when the writer personally interviews someone and records the data. Why do you think it isn’t cited formally, with footnotes and a works cited page? Do you think this informal format harms his credibility? Is there anything in this chapter that you would have liked more formally cited information about?
2. What do you think is Cycon’s **purpose** in telling this story, presumably for an audience of Americans? What do you think Cycon wants readers of his book to do, if anything?
3. It’s tricky to talk about one’s own good deeds without sounding vain or self-aggrandizing, but it’s hard to get other people to join you in a project if you don’t show you are “walking the talk” yourself. Considering this, how well do you think Cycon handles that **ethos** challenge here? What do you think of his philanthropic efforts and of his reporting of them? How about Dona Olga’s work and personality?
4. **Interview spin**: Cycon doesn’t give much space to the member of the Mara drug gang he interviews, but he seems try to give us a balanced view of the man. What details about the gang member seem to indict him for his life choices? What details seem to indict society, or at least incline us to not judge him as harshly? How does this fit in with Cycon’s purpose? How does it affect his ethos?
5. There are several brief **personal profiles** of the people living at the shelter, besides Dona Olga. Pick one that you found most interesting or moving and explain how it struck you. How did this person’s story (and the spin Cycon gives it) contribute to his **overall picture** of the dark side of the global coffee trade? Is the pathos appeal too heavy-handed, or does it seem appropriate?
6. From the behavior of the people on the train, and from what Cycon tells us about them, how would you characterize the group? What does Cycon emphasize about their group behavior? How does this group portrait (and the spin Cycon gives it) contribute to his **overall picture** of the dark side of the global coffee trade?
7. Why does Cycon add information about the Landless Farmer’s March? What does that add to our understanding of the **“big picture”** of Mexican/Central American immigration? Does it relate to any other protests going on in the world now?

**Missing pages** (the rest is on the library Web site. Sorry about that.)

From page 140 of *Javatrekker*

“Many of these folks haven’t eaten in a day or two. They need food to stay alert on the Death Train,” says Francisco. Good cops. BETA also acts as a counterweight to the black clad state police, who “protect” the migrants when they are not shaking them down for cash or sex. Bad cops.

The desk clerk seemed satisfied that we were in good hands. He knew these guys.

It was raining pretty hard when we arrived at the depot. Half of a big, black train was waiting to be coupled with the Death Train, and already there were a hundred people between the cars or sitting on top. The uniform of the day was black plastic garbage bags for ponchos and baseball hats. The only light came from a gas lantern at a food stall, where maybe fifty people crowded beneath its rusted corrugated awning to escape the downpour. Francisco pulled up the tracks, his headlights cutting through the blackness as people swarmed the BETA boys, waiting for food packets.

“Here,” Francisco said bluntly as he shoved a bunch of food packets into my gut. “Start tossing.” We frisbee’d the packets out into the darkness. The atmosphere became surreal and festive as people caught and shared out the food. When the food was delivered, Francisco announced that I was there to talk to coffee farmers about their experiences heading north. Some of the crowd took their food packets and scurried away to eat or hide the food, while several young men came forward. We wandered off toward an embankment where we could all sit together. The food stand threw enough light to keep a confidential shroud over the faces.

I explained that I was trying to understand the situation of the coffee farmers in these hard times, and that I wanted to take this information to the United States to make people more aware of their plight.

“So where did you guys come from?” I asked tentatively, aware that these young men needed anonymity and stealth to get north successfully. Two brothers were from Nicaragua; a sixteen-year-old from El Salvador; an older man from Honduras; and two others remained silent.

“We are from Matagalpa,” stated Benny, as he put his arm around his younger brother, Pablo. They appeared about sixteen and thirteen but I couldn’t be sure, as the rain, the darkness, and the Houston baseball caps kept me at a respectful distance. “Our dad lost the farm a year ago. Pablo stopped going to school to help out. We couldn’t pay his fees anyway and

Page 141

he liked to play hide-and-seek with the girls instead of studying.” Benny whacked Pablo affectionately on the back of the head. The water from the brim of Pedro’s hat splashed me in the face. Benny continued, “We protested to the government most of last year, marching around the country with other farmers. But nothing happened, so we came north.”

Benny had participated in the Landless Farmers March, where tens of thousands f dispossessed coffee farmers walked off the roads of Nicaragua to protest government and bank land seizures and the loss of livelihoods. It was a peaceful march that had lasted fourteen months. Yet like so much about the coffee crisis of the new millennium the march had received no attention from the U.S. press. I knew about it only because our Nicaraguan farmers requested that we send their annual profit share to the marchers to pay for plastic sheeting (housing) and food. The march gradually petered out amidst exhaustion, the need to feed their families, and ephemeral government promises to find land and jobs for the dispossessed farmers. I had also tried to visit one encampment in the town square of Matagalpa, but by the time I got there government trucks had carted the camping farmers off to other parts of Nicaragua to work on large farms.

Julio, the older man, had been a shopkeeper in an impoverished coffee village in Honduras. He shared a lesson in Survival Economics 101.

“I have only fifty *pesos*. I am hungry but I can’t buy food. I need the money to give to the gangs, the *Mara.* If I don’t have money to give, they might throw me off the train. Even those police in the black clothes steal from us if we look like we have something worth stealing.”

My education was disrupted by a deep rumble that shook the ground. We turned and saw a huge black shape edging up the tracks toward us. The Death Train had arrived.

The migrants scrambled to pick up their backpacks and near the train. In the dull light it was difficult to see the details of the train—but it was easy to feel that looming, menacing presence. The train screeched and banged as it backed up to grab the waiting freight cars. They came together with a loud pneumatic finality. Men and women scrambled to get in between the cars, the best place from which to hang on and not get hit by branches. Others climbed to the top and straddled the middle of the cars. I ran to the train and tried to talk to some of the new riders, urging them to hold on and care

End of page 141