

PART TWO: COFFEE AND CHOCOLATE

Kajette Solomon: Walk over to the two cases in the corner to the left of the shelves that look like they're built out of a giant clam shell. Both of these cases are filled with all sorts of vessels and equipment that would have been used to drink coffee and chocolate. One of my favorite objects is on the top shelf of the Sugar and Chocolate case, all the way to the left. This is a porcelain chocolate pot, and it's a precious object, decorated with carefully painted trees and bushes.

At first glance, the ceramics in this case seem innocent. But the commodities they once contained—coffee and chocolate—have very complicated histories, and people are still grappling with these histories today.

John Onwuchekwa: So I didn't even like coffee until 10 years ago. I had these little rules for my life and one of them was that I didn't like warm beverages. I wasn't really a fan.

John Onwuchekwa is the owner of Portrait Coffee in Atlanta, and when he started getting into the specialty coffee scene about 10 years ago, he noticed a pattern:

John Onwuchekwa: I found myself as one of the only people that looked like me in these specialty coffee shops. So behind the bar, you had the white dude with a beard and a flannel and all that. And as I looked around, there was nobody else that looked like me. And so I just made the assumption, "Oh yeah, coffee's like golf. Coffee is a white man's game, and maybe I'll be the Tiger Woods of this thing." Then I started to try and look around and find, yo, is there anybody else that looks like me, that listens to the music that I do, that talks like me that likes coffee like I do?

And when he couldn't find anyone, he turned to books.

John Onwuchekwa: Where did it come from? How did it get here? And to my surprise, I was caught off guard when I realized coffee came from Ethiopia...And then I learned coffee really only grows along the equator. So I learned this: coffee literally grows where Black and brown people grow.

Today, 80% of coffee is consumed in North America and Europe, but 90% of it is harvested by Black and brown farmers in developing countries along the equator.

John Onwuchekwa: Black and brown people own coffee. It's their land. They farm, they work. But then as it goes up through processing, exporting, importing, roasting, and retailing, by the time it gets to the top, Black and brown people got off the train a long time ago.

John Onwuchekwa: But in the picture that's painted in our world, in our country, and the economy by and large, it felt like Black and brown people were cropped out of that picture.

Like John says, today, the commodities represented in the cases in front of you (coffee and chocolate) are, in some ways, white man's game, and unfortunately, they have been for a long time.

Pascale Rihouet: The first thing I should say is that what tea, coffee, and chocolate have in common is that they were so expensive that they were consumed in small quantities among the elite. (CUT LAST SENTENCE)

That's Pascale Rihouet. She's a professor at RISD who studies the history of drinking rituals around coffee, tea, and chocolate. She's a born and bred Parisian, and is pretty entertained by how Americans drink coffee today.

Pascale Rihouet: Why do people in America walk with a cup in their hands? Why do they need the cup for when they go from A to Z? It's funny. To this day, it's a little weird to me. I rarely do it.

But that's beside the point. What Pascale found is that in the 17th and 18th centuries, beverages like hot chocolate and coffee were extremely valuable. To the point where they were locked up in chests at night to keep them safe from theft. They were enjoyed only by the white, wealthy elite of Providence—people like Stephen Hopkins who signed the Declaration of Independence and the Brown family, who built about half the city.

Pascale Rihouet: Coffee, tea, and chocolate were used to perform. To perform in a circle of guests and show off how you sat, how you talked, how you handled vessels that were not always easy to manipulate...The whole point was to show off your education through your good manners.

But there's a flip side to this lavish consumption. Here's scholar Chris Roberts in Downtown Providence:

Chris Roberts: Yes, the wealthy families of Providence may have owned these objects, but many times they were probably served by people who worked for them whether they be indentured servants or enslaved black folks or enslaved Africans.

Chris Roberts: It is quite likely that after Stephen Hopkins signed the Declaration of Independence, he enjoyed a hot chocolate dessert on something resembling one of those objects served to him by somebody perhaps who was enslaved in a house that we can walk to from here. That matters.

As well-known politicians sipped on hot chocolate in their ostentatious parlors, making decisions about the future of the country, enslaved people worked tirelessly in the kitchen, performing the labor that went into these drinks.

And so in the same house, just rooms apart, these two groups were leading very different lives in America in the 18th century. In one room:

Pascale Rihouet: Sugar tongs were used to pick daintily your sugar lump and place it into your cup and you would use the spoon to stir the drink. Never drink from your spoon.

And in the other:

Enslaved servants would be roasting cacao beans, shelling them, placing them on a large heavy grinding stone...

Pascale Rihouet: And you crush. You crush them with a lava stone hand. It's very heavy, and you hold it with two hands, and you use the weight of your body to push and pull, push and pull as you crush.

While back in the parlor:

Pascale Rihouet: You hold your cup from the bottom with three fingers. You might hold your cup with two or three fingers with one thumb under the cup and one or two fingers on the upper rim. You would sip daintily. You would not slurp. That was very rude.

And in the kitchen:

Pascale Rihouet: If you want to make chocolate paste that is malleable enough, it has to be formed into cakes and it should not be too gritty. You're going to crush your beans for hours.

In the parlor, it's quite likely that all of this labor went right over the heads of wealthy white consumers. In fact, it didn't cross their minds at all until one of their servants came in to collect their empty cups.

Chris Roberts: There are people who handled these objects hundreds of times but never ate off them. Or perhaps if they ate off them, they ate off them in secret or in isolation. Perhaps they hated these objects and had no interest in doing anything but breaking them, right?

It's hard to see at first glance, but if you look closely at the blue and white chocolate pot on the top shelf of the Chocolate case, you'll notice that it's riddled with cracks and fractures. They've been meticulously repaired with neat little staples to the point that they're almost invisible.

Though enslaved people played a huge role in feeding and sustaining their wealthy white owners, their labor was pushed out of sight, sequestered in the kitchen, rendered invisible like mended cracks on a cup.

And it's not so different today. The labor of Black and brown people is often still rendered invisible—only now this labor is happening a continent away, rather than a few rooms away. Today, corporations reap the benefits while farmers in developing countries cultivate coffee and cacao for very little money—their work vastly underappreciated and unacknowledged.

John Onwuchekwa, founder of Portrait Coffee again.

John Onwuchekwa: And I just felt on the inside like, something's got to be done. This ain't right. It's not just an inconvenience that black and brown folks aren't here. It seems a little bit more like an injustice. So Portrait started because we wanted to change the picture that came to peoples' minds when they think of specialty coffee

John Onwuchekwa: One of the first things that slaves did when they learned to read and write is they didn't give themselves to write these great treatises. What they did, they basically would write these narratives of their lives. And the reason that they would write this is they would say, "Hey, there's a picture that's being painted of history, and we've been cropped out of that. So we're going to write these stories about our lives so that we can insert ourselves back in." So that there's this holistic picture. In a sense, they created portraits of their lives to change the picture that comes to mind when people think of American history.

John Onwuchekwa: And so, we think that coffee is more than just a commodity or product. It's a platform to be able to do good in the world. And we want to use it to change the picture that comes to mind when people think of specialty coffee, because we feel if we can tell that story well and reshape that narrative, that we have the possibility to do it in every other industry that coffee touches.

This has been Part Two of the Trading Earth Soundwalk. In Part Three, we'll consider the individuals who made the ceramics displayed in this exhibition and talk to an artist who makes ceramics today.