
I was ten years old when I had my first cultural encounter with Starbucks. During his monologue in Nora Ephron’s 1998 film *You've Got Mail*, a suit-clad Tom Hanks struts through the broad streets of the Upper West Side. He steps into a bustling coffee bar, the site of a morning mass ritual busy, important New Yorkers. The corner shop remains unidentifiable until Hanks’ voice narrates the scene:

> The whole purpose of places like Starbucks is for people with no decision-making ability whatsoever to make six decisions just to buy one cup of coffee. Short, tall, light, dark, caf, decaf, low-fat, non-fat, etc. So people who don't know what the hell they're doing or who on earth they are can, for only $2.95, get not just a cup of coffee but an absolutely defining sense of self…¹

In those few seconds, my pre-adolescent brain perceived the sights and sound of Starbucks and its customers, and I too believed that just a few lattés now and again could induct me into this society of cultural and intellectual exchange, launching me into the living room that I never had with the lively trumpeting of Louis Armstrong. It was not long after its brief film cameo that I began begging my mother to stop at Starbucks on the way home from school. Less than twenty-four hours after I cracked the cover of Bryant Simon’s *Everything but the Coffee: Learning about America from Starbucks*, I discovered that my relationship to the chain as a loyal consumer represents broader cultural, political and sociological phenomena in American society, phenomena that challenge the very image upon which the wild success of Starbucks rests.

**Overview:** In his 2009 work, Simon seamlessly animates the numerous, longstanding tensions and contradictions surrounding *the Starbucks moment* in American society. From Ray Oldenburg’s “third place” to George Ritzer’s “McDonaldization of society” Simon

successfully outlines the historical and sociological antecedents to the Starbucks moment. Unlike the numerous existing studies of Starbucks as an example of exceptional entrepreneurship, Simon seeks to prove the contrary; namely, Starbucks engages consumers in ways more familiar to us than we would like to admit. Through his examination of consumerism in our increasingly privatized, “postneed” (i.e. consumerism is no longer concerned with necessity) world, Simon argues, “The pullback of community, the state, and other binding agents allowed brands like Starbucks to sell more goods and garner greater profits by reaching deeper into our lives and consciousness and claiming spaces that civic institutions, including the government, had occupied in the past” (Simon, 4). Simon thus asserts that, one cappuccino at a time, Starbucks markets authenticity, individuality, predictability, discovery, and community as cultural cachet. Starbucks’ ubiquity throughout American society reveals that consumers’ desires extend far beyond the occasional macchiato. Instead, Starbucks customers buy in order fulfill otherwise unfulfilled desires, as well as to define themselves in relation to others through their purchases. Simon writes,

Don’t have enough community? Starbucks will manufacture some for you. Having a bad day? Starbucks will pick you up and be your friend, too. Wish that our foreign policy helped out the poor and that people around the world—especially after 9/11—liked us better? Starbucks can do that as well. Who needs government or partisan politics when there is Starbucks? Starbucks can clean up the environment, engineer diversity, and, for a finishing touch, splash up our lives with a little art. (Simon, 13)

Simon ultimately identifies the myriad ways in which Starbucks fails to earn this exalted image and deliver on these promises, from its environmental practices to its neocolonial exploitation of third world communities. He argues that Starbucks’ development and interests reflect those of other multi-billion-dollar corporations we know and hate. In spite of this reality of Starbucks as first and foremost a corporate machine, Simon’s dogged research
efforts (which include personal conversations with customers, Starbucks employees, and corporate representatives, as well as his own experience in outlets across the world) confirm that customers will pay a premium to “feel better about themselves and the state of the world” (Simon, 219).

**How this work can be applied to American Studies:** Simon effectively weaves his narrative, revealing the nuanced roles of class, education, politics, and globalization in the Starbucks phenomenon. His work is thorough, well organized, and unpretentious. Though Simon’s work inherently implicates millions of Americans for their shallow attempts to define themselves through their purchases, any Starbucks regular cannot refute his basic argument; namely, Starbucks represents a single, yet significant, source of cultural capital in our consumer-based society. Most importantly, Simon urges Americans to recognize and challenge the tensions that exist between the illusions that we consume every day and the stark reality before us. Simon’s work represents one significant step toward doing so. I would recommend this book for American Studies courses focused particularly on the sociological questions regarding urban development, the environment and consumer culture, including AMS 493A (“Culture, Politics, and the Environment”).