



Up Close in the Flat World: Learning about the Global at a Local Starbucks in Singapore

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In this ethnographic essay, I look at drinking Starbucks coffee in Singapore, especially by young Malays. What does it mean for these teens from the most economically and socially marginal community in this multicultural country to publicly consume oversized American products? What are they saying about themselves and their relationship to their tradition-bound community? What can we learn about globalization and how it works by charting the consumption of this American product by a somewhat outsider community in this transnational place? I examine one group of buyers to explore the localized meaning of the global.

Like many people, in 2005 I was new to the study of globalization. To understand the process better, I picked up a copy of Thomas Friedman's birthday cake-sized book *The World Is Flat*. I read it before going to Singapore for a "starbucking" tour of the Asian nation located just 85 miles north of the equator. As I went from Starbucks to Starbucks in Singapore, I could not get Friedman's central argument out of my head. To Friedman, this somewhat awkward metaphor suggests the emergence, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, of a potentially liberating global market of labor and ideas more powerful and more equitable than nation-states and local traditions and customs. Linked together by Netscape, Microsoft Office, and fiber-optic cables, Indian technicians solve the computer problems of Texas college students; Chinese graduates of Purdue University's engineering school start dot.com companies in France; cartoonists in the United States do imaging for South African firms; and a Seattle-based company sells

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URL: <http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2009/simon.pdf>

Italian-inspired beverages made from Costa Rican coffee beans in Singapore and forty or more other countries on just about every continent in the world.¹

When I went to the long, somewhat narrow, two-storey Starbucks in Holland Village (an upscale, expatriate neighborhood in Singapore), an American friend who was living in the country at the time and who also had just finished Friedman's book, took a sip of his venti coffee served in a white paper cup with a beige java jacket, looked around at the slightly pop art on the walls and the purple velvet chairs, and smiled. "Wow, this is just like Chapel Hill. This really is the Flat World!" It did seem eerily familiar, and not just because Starbucks used the same cups, furniture, and color scheme in Singapore that it used in North Carolina and everywhere else, but also because, the "same" upper-middle-class people (David Brooks' "Bobos" and Richard Florida's members of the "Creative Class") were there, and they were using the space, at first glance, in very similar ways to their counterparts in the United States and Britain.²

It was 10 a.m. when we purchased our first coffee at the Holland Village Starbucks. Most of the customers were women: well-dressed women sitting alone reading the *Straits Times* or the *DaVinci Chronicles*, women meeting other women to talk and plan a school event, and women with pre-kindergarten children taking a break between errands or getting a little extra pick-me-up for the day ahead. In an upstairs corner, a group of men in dark suits and striped ties talked in hushed voices, their conversations punctuated by the ringing of cell phones. Across from them sat a man studying the pages of the *Financial Times* and pecking away at a Blackberry. Office workers and clerks from nearby shops stopped in and chatted with the baristas as they waited for venti-sized cups filled with frothy brown, pink, and white drinks.

When we came back to this Starbucks later that afternoon, and again in the evening a few days later, students in uniforms representing private international schools from around the city had taken over, especially the more isolated second floor. While their more middle-class, more Singaporean counterparts congregated, it seemed, at McDonald's, the comings

¹ Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2005).

² David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York, 2000); and Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York, 2002). See also Michele Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class* (Chicago, 1992).

and goings reminded me of a Starbucks in a well-heeled U.S. suburb.³ Both in Singapore and the United States, the upper-middle-class teens arrived in groups of twos and threes, some straining under the weight of their bulging backpacks. Without stopping, they headed up the stairs and dropped off their belongings. After securing a table, they came down and ordered: hot chocolates, frappuccinos, mocha lattes, all with extra whipped cream. Drinks in hand, they went back upstairs and studied, played around on Facebook, and texted friends, who perhaps were sitting in a Starbucks in another part of the city. Though these teens might study more than their American counterparts do, given the emphasis on education in Singapore, this really could have been a Starbucks in suburban Atlanta, Georgia, or Denver, Colorado, in the late afternoon.

From Holland Village, I headed over to Orchard Road. When I got there, I felt like I had gone another step closer to the center of the flat world. Orchard Road is Singapore's premier shopping and entertainment zone, a cross between Chicago's Michigan Avenue and London's Piccadilly Circus with a dash of New York's Times Square thrown in. It could be, in many ways, almost any major metropolitan area. Lining the street's wide sidewalk are a Borders Bookstore and a Dunkin Donuts kiosk, a Guess jeans outlet, a place selling Calloway golf clubs, an Armani boutique, and a couple of cramped 7-Eleven stores. This is where the Hard Rock Café and Toys-R-Us, California Pizza Kitchen and the Hilton Hotel are located. The movie theaters advertised the latest from Brad Pitt and Jackie Chan. Department stores—several based in Japan—sold Gucci bags and Disney bed covers.

The landscape was so familiar and so predictable that I would have been surprised if there were not a Starbucks. In fact, there were three Starbucks on Orchard Road. At least two more of the coffee shops have opened on the street since I first visited. With its forty-nine stores across Singapore, Starbucks has become so familiar that, when a journalist complained about the Spiderman movie franchise "hogging up" all the movie screens in town, he compared it to Starbucks.⁴

It was a Sunday evening, toward the end of a busy shopping day in shopping-obsessed Singapore, when I sat down with my friend on the terrace in front of the Starbucks located next to the Burger King at the base of the Liat Towers in the heart of the Orchard Road shopping district. We watched the flow of people for hours. Tourists stopped in for coffee. Families carrying plastic grocery bags and pushing strollers came for desserts. Fastidious-looking twenty-something men in pressed khaki pants

³ For a contrast with McDonald's, see Chua Beng Huat, "Singaporeans Ingesting McDonald's," in *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*, ed. Chua Beng Huat (London, 2000), 191-93.

⁴ Tay Yek Keak, "Two Women, Too Much," *Straits Times*, 30 April 2007.

and bright Lacoste shirts stopped in with friends or dates. And there were scores of teenagers. At this point, I still felt I was in the middle of the flat world. Middle-class teens everywhere flock to Starbucks on the weekends, using it as a combination clubhouse and social room.⁵

Almost on cue, a gangly Indian boy not more than 16 years old walked into the Starbucks. He was wearing jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt—the uniform of youth schooled by MTV (Music Television) and Gap clothing stores in the flat world. Blazed across the front of his shirt were the words, “GLOBAL CITIZEN.” How is that for the flat world?

But the longer I sat there, the more I started to notice the details of the dress, drinks, and dance of people going through the line, finding seats, and “hanging out.” In these details, differences—some small, some more significant—emerged. Moreover, the differences raised questions about just how flat the world is and just how much the concept can help us understand the meaning of consumption in the global order. Eventually, these differences made me realize that I needed another analytical framework to understand what people were doing when they were consuming American things outside the United States. While globalization surely relied on technological innovations and the transnational flow of capital and labor, it has, it seemed clear after observing things at the Orchard Road Starbucks, generated locally produced and mediated meanings.

Across the world, from Singapore to Chapel Hill, despite the striking similarities in design and customer profile, I had learned through visiting more than 450 Starbucks in ten countries over a five-year stretch that people do different things at the corporate coffee shops. In downtown stores across the United States, take-out represents as much as 80 percent of the business. While more customers stop and sit on the weekends, most still walk right in and walk right out.⁶ Customers in Central London “grab and go” as well. But just about everywhere else, people drink in. “The few times I’ve shown up with a [Starbucks] to-go cup in my hands at work,” Ellen Dunne, an expatriate graphic designer living in Paris, explained, “I’ve been laughed at. I won’t do it anymore. It’s asking for ridicule—it’s like showing up at the office with an American flag on my shirt.”⁷ In Spain, Starbucks is not so much a coffee shop as an adult milkshake saloon. Empty in the mornings, when in the United States the stores resemble caffeine delivery assembly lines, the shops in Madrid, Seville, and Barcelona fill up in the afternoons and on the weekends with couples

⁵ Journalists have written quite a bit about teens at Starbucks. See for instance, Katharine Mieszkowski, “The Frappuccino Generation,” *salon.com*, 27 Aug. 2006; and Emily Alpert, “Caffeinated Teens,” *Gilroy Dispatch*, 15 Nov. 2006.

⁶ My observations bear this out, as do Starbucks’ internal documents.

⁷ Joe Ray, “Starbucks Does Paris,” *Denver Post*, 25 Jan. 2004.

splurging on 6-inch-tall frappuccinos, plate-sized chocolate chip cookies, and big wedges of cheesecake.⁸ In Japan, women are over-represented at Starbucks, as they seek refuge from the male, and slightly dangerous, enclaves of the subway, teahouse, and bar.⁹ Starbucks customers in Mexico pay almost twice the average day's wages of their fellow citizens to valet park their cars in front of the coffee shops. In Singapore, too, there is, I started to discern, a local Starbucks culture, or more aptly, a local rhythm to Starbucks; and this localness is a key to any understanding of global consumption.

Harvard University anthropologist James L. Watson would call these contrasting consumer patterns of behavior and buying, the "glocal": the way that people in different corners of the world localize, and even obscure, the specific origins, or rework the meanings and significance, of the home country of the products of these multinational corporations.¹⁰

Singapore has its own glocal Starbucks patterns.¹¹ Only about 10 percent of Singaporean Starbucks customers "grab and go." Midmornings were busier than in the United States. Traffic peaked on weekends, especially in the afternoons. However, these glocal patterns do not capture everything that was going on at the Orchard Road Starbucks.

At that Orchard Road Starbucks, perhaps the most conspicuous group of customers were androgynous-looking young people, their faces caked with make-up and dark eyeliner, dressed in black leather and feathery boas. They were part of the Visual Kei crowd, groups of fans imitating the over-the-top styles of heavily costumed, New Wave-sounding Japanese bands such as Malice Mizer, X Japan, and Moi dix Mois.¹² Clearly, they wanted to be seen, and Starbucks was their stage. But they were not the only dressed-up teens at the Orchard Road Starbucks. More than half of the customers sitting outside on the terrace seemed to be young Malays, in Western rather than traditional clothing, known within their peer group as "scene kids."

⁸ On Spain, see Bryant Simon, "Los Intangibles del Frappuccino," *Foreign Policy, Edición española*, June/July 2007. URL: <http://www.fp-es.org/los-intangibles-del-frappuccino>.

⁹ Manabu Fukshima, "From Mount Fuji to Mount Rainier," *Seattle Post*, 16 Jan. 1998.

¹⁰ James L. Watson, *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia* (Stanford, Calif., 1997). In some ways, Watson is engaged in a conversation with George Ritzer. In his studies of McDonald's, Ritzer generally sees American-led globalization as a rationalizing and homogenizing force. See for example, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 2004).

¹¹ Charles Bright and Michael Geyer, "Where in the World Is America? The History of the United States in the Global Age," in *Rethinking American History in the Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley, Calif., 2002), 63-98.

¹² Danielle Ang, "Attention-Grabbing Visuals," *Strait Times*, 17 June 2006.

The scene kids arrived in single-sex groups of threes, fours, and fives. Like the boy in the “Global Citizen” shirt, they wore the uniform of the international youth brigade, nothing as outlandish as the Visual Kei crew’s apparel. Both men and women wore jeans, extra tight for the women. Most wore sneakers. Some had on Nikes, but the hippest had on blue, black, green, and camouflage-colored low-topped Chucks, retro canvas Converse that basketball players wore in the days of short shorts and set shots. Most of the men teased and twisted their dyed hair up into well-executed spikes and swooshes. Half wore T-shirts. The others had on short-sleeve shirts that hung on their thin bodies with a conspicuous, even defiant, looseness as if to say how comfortable they were in their own skin and out in public at Starbucks. Above their skinny jeans, some women wore tiny tank tops held up by taut spaghetti straps. Most had on clingy kid-sized T-shirts with English sayings written in glittery gold and silver letters. One young Malay woman broadcast her affiliation with “Brooklyn.” Another portrayed herself as the “The It Girl,” while yet another announced that she had “Done Justin Three Times.”

What did consuming Starbucks in billboard T-shirts mean to these Malay teens? Did it make them “Global Citizens”? What were they endorsing, or protesting, or performing with their red-streaked hair, colorful shoes, form-fitting jeans, T-shirts that doubled as placards, and choice of American corporate coffee? Whom were they talking to, and who was involved in the cultural conversation at Starbucks? What do the consuming acts of Malay teens at Starbucks tell us about consumption and how it operates in the global marketplace? Once these teens are part of the discussion, what happens to the flat world metaphor or the idea of the glocal?

In Singapore, this island of 4 million people where the government has embraced the flat world model of globalization with the tightest of grips, Singaporean Malays are perhaps the most resistant, most traditional, and most outside of the brave new international world order of the country’s other dominant ethnic groups. Although scholars can and do generalize about Malays (the National University of Singapore, for instance, has a Malay Studies program), this is a complicated social and cultural category, blending together different ethnic and national groups. Malays continue to have larger families than Chinese and Indians do. In this rather secular place, they remain committed Muslims, carrying on their religious and cultural traditions. While most adult Malay women do not cover their faces with veils, they do wear head covers. Many also wear versions of the traditional *baju kurung*, a long-sleeved blouse worn often over an ankle-length skirt.¹³ Unlike the scene kids at Starbucks, they would never go out

¹³ Lesley Layton and Pang Guek Cheng, *Singapore* (Tarrytown, N.Y., 2002), 48, 57.

in clingy shirts, skinny jeans, or any other revealing garment. Some might even call figure-hugging clothes deviant. As one Malay informant told me, her mom would look at the kids in MTV gear, shake her head, and say, “You are Muslim, why would you dress this way?” With their devotion to faith and their stylistic moderation, Malays remain, then, the most tied to the local, home, and family of any of Singapore’s main ethnic groups.

People who study Singapore discuss the “marginality” of the Singapore Malay community. As a statistical category, they remain near the bottom of Singapore’s economic ladder. Though they generally possess better, higher-paying jobs than Bangladeshi construction operatives, Filipino house cleaners, and other guest workers, they are over-represented in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. Men tend to work as truck drivers, movers, warehousemen, and factory hands. When they do work outside the home, Malay women are concentrated in the clerical and service sectors, often working as secretaries and office cleaners. Among the modestly successful are small business owners who serve other Malays at hawker stands or at small retail shops. In recent years, however, more and more Malays have graduated from universities and moved to white-collar jobs, but these success stories have not changed larger social perceptions.¹⁴ A Chinese Singaporean told me that Malays in his country regularly got “the short end of the stick.”

When I spoke to a group of twenty-something Malay women who were doing graduate work in sociology at the National University of Singapore, they immediately talked about cab rides to illustrate their social position. When they get into a taxi and ask the driver (usually ethnically Chinese) to take them to the university, the driver will invariably look at them and say, “Do you work there? Are you a secretary or something?” When they respond that they are students, he will answer, “Really,” looking back at them again. When I asked why this happened, the women laughed. “Well,” one answered, “we’re Malay. We are the lazy ones.” Singaporeans, they said, see Malays this way. “So,” one of them told me, “we have to work twice as hard to get half as far as anybody else.”

¹⁴ For analysis and data on the place of Malays in Singapore’s social structure, see Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy, and Ideology* (Singapore, 1989); Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Kuala Lumpur, 1998); Lian Kwen Fee and Ananda Rajah, “‘Race’ and Ethnic Relations in Singapore,” and Syed Farid Alatas, “Sociology of the Malays” [in Singapore], both in *The Making of Singapore Sociology*, ed. Tong Chee Kiong and Lian Kwen Fee (Singapore, 2002), 221-46 and 289-319. For more background, see Rokiah Talib, “Malaysia: Power Shifts and the Matrix,” in *Consumption in Asia*, ed. Chua Beng Huat (New York, 2000), 35-60.

How did these cultural notions of marginality influence the “scene kids”? How did their purchases and their presence on the transnational Orchard Road strip reflect this larger perception? They went to that Starbucks, the Malay graduate students explained, to make themselves visible to their parents and others in Singapore. In response to their community’s traditionalism and diminished social status, the presence of these teens at the largest and most public Starbucks in Singapore broadcast a sense of themselves as different from their parents and gave them a way to express their grievances against their everyday treatment as well as their aspirations to be fully included in Singaporean society.

This is not just a Singapore or a Malay story, but a clearer way to see the possible meanings of consumption in the global order. What is apparent is not flatness or singular ways of consuming, but multiple ways of buying and speaking through purchasing.

In his book, *Consumed*, Benjamin Barber, Kekst Professor of Civil Society at the University of Maryland, tries to make the hands of consumer capitalism visible. With warehouses full of goods and an unending thirst for profits, companies, he says, are always looking for buyers. But as Barber notes, in places such as the United States or Singapore, few physical needs remain unmet. Therefore, marketers must tap into vague wants and turn them into must-have feelings. To Barber, the crucial phases in this process go on behind the scenes in the offices of advertisers and the meeting rooms of consumer persuaders.¹⁵ These people make us want stuff, and like sheep, Barber reasons with a nod to Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt school, we head off to Target and Gap and do as we are told. We “buy, buy, buy.” Consumption, then, amounts to a grand and colossal manipulation.

However, by looking at what those Malay scene kids are wearing and doing up-close at Starbucks in Singapore, an alternative picture of consumption starts to emerge. Marketers might have lured these teenagers to Orchard Road with sly come-ons and clever inducements, but once they got there, they began to exercise control over the products. They take what they purchase and invest it with layers of meaning that their peer group and parents understand, often independent of what the company that makes the goods and the advertisers who pitch them intended to happen.

¹⁵ Benjamin Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York, 2007). For another look at post-need buying, see Michael R. Solomon, *Conquering Consumerspace: Marketing Strategies for a Branded World* (New York, 2003). For a useful overview of theories of consumption from Adorno to Pierre Bourdieu and beyond, see Grant McCracken, “Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 13 (June 1986): 71-84.

Buying to these teens (and to others) is a form of expression, a carefully staged performance of group and self-identification. The global in these purchases becomes, then, part of the script.

Thomas Friedman, not surprisingly, loves Singapore. With its sturdy banking structure, financial transparency, and free-trade policies, the country puts up perhaps the least resistance anywhere to outside capital and ideas, which Friedman advocates most strenuously in his book about the flat world. He would applaud the willingness of many in this country to participate in global exchanges, which he thinks makes the world flatter and thus richer and fairer. For Friedman there is nothing wrong with eating a burger at McDonald's and drinking a coffee at Starbucks. In fact, he suggests that these kinds of transactions and activities can be cultural levelers/flatteners. In his version of the flat world, a global market and the common cultural practices of consuming American and Chinese products (and eventually Peruvian and Cambodian products) will unite everyone. The more Americans eating sushi and the more Malays drinking lattes the better, the flatter, the world will be.

Friedman would probably take special interest in those Malay teens at the Starbucks along Orchard Road. Culture is not a central or subtle concept in the *New York Times* reporter's bestselling book. He does not give this variable as much weight as he does technology. When he does look toward culture, he sees it as an essential trait that all too easily can become an impediment—a hill or a mountain—in the path of the flat world's advance. Even worse, culture represents the past, dividing people, in his mind, in artificial ways. He points to Muslim culture, in particular, as a problem. It is, he argues, too rigid, too insular, and therefore too resistant to the wave of flatness he sees as key to the future. "In a world where the single greatest advantage a culture can have is the ability to foster adaptability and adoptability," he writes, "the Muslim world "is dominated by a religious clergy that literally bans *itihad*, reinterpretation of the principles of Islam in light of current circumstances." So those Muslim teens drinking American products in a very global city would give him hope, hope that what he sees as cultural hurdles and barriers to economic progress can be overcome by consumption.¹⁶

Many of the parents of the scene kids share at least a portion of Friedman's perspective on globalization. One young Malay told me her cousin had to hide her outfit before she went to Starbucks. She would leave the house with her headgear on. Between home and the Starbucks, she

¹⁶ Friedman, *The World Is Flat*, 326. He concedes that some Muslim countries are better than others: Lebanon, Bahrain, Indonesia, and Malaysia, for example, mostly because their religious communities are more secular than those in other—unnamed—Muslim countries. The countries he names, perhaps not surprisingly, have Starbucks outlets.

would change into her uniform for latte drinking: a T-shirt and tight jeans. She knew her parents would object to her clothes and to her spending time at the Western coffee shop. Like most of their generation, her parents grew up in a distinct historic and religious moment in Southeast Asia. Her parents probably practiced an essentially moderate version of Islam. In response—each generation is always responding to the next—the parents of the latte-sipping teens re-embraced tradition and ritual. That was their rebellion. Now, they stand in a sense as neo-traditionalists and as such, they share Thomas Friedman’s worldview, although definitely not his optimism. They worry about the impact of the global on their children. Indeed, globalization in Singapore and elsewhere has made for strange ideological alliances, pulling together elements from the right and left, adherents of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism.¹⁷

While anarchists protesting the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, Washington, in 1999 “busted up” the Starbucks, Malay parents rail with words against “cultural imperialism.” Like other traditionalists, and some nationalists on both the left and the right, they harbor a deep-seated fear of outside capital and influences. Not long after the battle of Seattle, Starbucks opened a store near the Imperial Palace in the Forbidden City in the Chinese capital of Beijing. “I’m no anti-globalization protestor, nor am I about to become one,” Singapore’s Chua Chin Hon wrote in the *Straits Times* in 2003. But after the “American coffee giant,” in his words, opened its Forbidden City outlet, he thought he could understand “a little of the rage against the global capitalist machinery’s relentless and oft-times, senseless drive to sell a few more cups of coffee, burgers, or T-shirts.”¹⁸ “This is an American product,” complained a middle-aged officer in the People’s Liberation Army about this shop; “it’s imperialism. We should kick it out.”¹⁹ Many Malay parents share these fears. They worry about creeping Americanization/Westernization; the two are often interchangeable. To them, Levis, MTV, and Starbucks operate like cultural Trojan horses, sneaking into their communities and introducing the worst and most corrosive aspects of America, its sex- and money-obsessed culture, a culture in their minds much like a meal at McDonald’s filled with empty calories and tasteless, substanceless food. Even worse, cultural nationalists

¹⁷ Nafish Bte Abdul Hadid, “Adult Anxieties: Regulation of Spaces for Young People in Singapore” (Honors Thesis in Geography, National University of Singapore, 2008). See also how these views get mixed together in the voice of a pro-Palestinian, pro-Singapore tradition blogger, Ney Reed, “Globalization and Its Impact on Singapore Family Values,” posted 11 Dec. 2006. URL: <http://www.onlinecitizen.com/2006/12/11/globalization-and-its-impact-on-singapore-family-values>.

¹⁸ Chua Chin Hon, “Capitalism Runs Amok,” *Straits Times*, 16 Feb. 2003.

¹⁹ Peter Harmsen. “Starbucks Raises Hackles for Invasion of Beijing’s Forbidden City,” *Agence France Presse*, 1 Dec. 2000.

see Starbucks and its commercial cousins such as Disney and Coke as curses and contaminants.²⁰ Drinking Starbucks, some believe, means drinking America and this can cause a dangerous reaction. Overexposure to American things and culture, Malay (and Chinese and Indian) traditionalists in Singapore warn, leads to obsessive individualism, moral decay (everything from juvenile delinquency to drug use to premarital sex to divorce), and the destruction of local values, concerns, and community.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom, professor of East Asian Studies at the University of California at Irvine, calls the way traditionalists, nationalists, and Freidman understand the consumption of American products “a Mickey Mouse approach to globalization.” Cultural globalization, he argues, is not as simple as drinking a “grande” coffee and then absorbing the values of the brand, or even more, the values of the nation where the corporation houses its headquarters. That is essentially, though, what conservatives and flat-worlders think, hope, and fear. As the Malay story shows, global products like Starbucks coffee hold different meanings in different countries, but even more they hold different meanings for different people within countries. Not everyone is drinking the same thing when drinking at Starbucks. For some a mocha latte might be an endorsement of American cultural and political power, but probably not for many.

To begin with, globalization has produced an alternative and little-noticed backlash. Some have responded to the presence of McDonald’s, Zara, and Lacoste by grabbing the local and traditional in a tighter embrace. In the United States, this explains to some extent the nostalgia for the corner store and the preference for the quirky local coffee shop and burger joint. In Singapore, a small group of Malay teens have responded to the spread of Starbucks and other Western cultural institutions by practicing more orthodox Islam or by “hanging out” near Arab Street, the heart of the older Malay community in Singapore, smoking *sheesha* and eating and drinking only Malay things, including Malay coffee.²¹

Still, Malay teens visiting the Starbucks under the Liat Towers for an afternoon latte do not wake up the next day, endorsing U.S. policy toward the Palestinians or the war in Iraq, as the cultural imperialist argument vaguely implies they would. Nor do they transform themselves into characters in MTV reality shows, “hooking up,” “dirty dancing,” and “throwing back 40s” (or endless liters of Tiger in Singapore), as some Malay parents think all young Americans do, and fear that their children will, too, if they are overexposed to Western culture.

²⁰ For more on this, see Chua Beng-Huat, “Consuming Asians: Ideas and Issues,” in *Consumption in Asia*, 12-13.

²¹Chua Beng Huat, *Life Is Not Complete without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore* (Singapore, 2003), 79.

A key first step, then, to understanding the political and cultural meanings of consuming America—or products associated with America—outside the United States is to identify, in Wasserstrom’s words, “who is doing the wearing, singing, drinking, or shopping.”²² It is also important to understand, as theorists such as Grant McCracken have suggested, how consumers use products and rework the significance of the product’s national origins, in both the real and symbolic senses.

One way of better understanding globalization on the ground is to borrow the framework of post-modern literary criticism. Scholars such as Janice Radway pointed out in the 1980s that texts are not completely stable or wholly determined by the author, or in this case by the marketer and the manufacturer. Readers and buyers have the freedom and power to reinterpret the messages and images before them. Buyers know that products talk; they say something about the user.²³ However, we can question whom the products and the users of these products are talking to, and who is listening in a given moment. For the global, getting at this conversation means not erasing the specific local context (the Flat World way of thinking), but highlighting, as scholars Ann Cvetkovich, Douglas Kellner, and Peter Jackson have, the busy cultural intersection between the producer and the consumer, the multinational and the local.²⁴

In 1997, journalist Elizabeth Gwee went to the Starbucks under Liat Towers, Singapore’s first Starbucks. She asked customers what they liked about the place. Over lattes, a 28-year-old woman told her that Starbucks had replaced McDonald’s as the in-place. However, she did not say anything about the American origins of the company. “The whole area—Orchard Road—is a like a breath of fresh air. . . . It’s like . . . something which [you] might have experienced on holidays in Europe.” Therefore, for

²² Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “A Mickey Mouse Approach to Globalization,” *Yale Global Online*, posted 16 June 2003. URL: www.globalpolicy.org/globaliz/cultural/2003/0618mickey.htm.

²³ For an important example of post-modernism and the act of reading, see Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984). On consumption as a form of symbolic exchange, see these classic texts: Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York, 1979); and Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988).

²⁴ Ann Cvetkovich and Douglas Kellner, *Articulating the Global and the Local: Globalization and Cultural Studies* (Boulder, Colo., 1996); and Peter Jackson, “Local Consumption Cultures in a Globalizing World,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24 (June 2004): 165-78. For an extremely perceptive case study of ethnic tensions in Singapore as they played out on Orchard Road, see Kimberly Trager Bohley, “Browsing Madness and Other Bad Behavior” (dissertation chapter in author’s possession.)

this well-traveled woman, Starbucks—really, coffee in general—represented the Continent and continental sophistication. Others Gwee talked with also imagined Starbucks as a place apart, maybe, as far from Singapore as the United States. One teen told her, “this is our hang out . . . you don’t even know you are in Singapore.”²⁵

For Malay teens, this sense of escape was, perhaps, even more pressing, even more appealing. When I asked the three Malay sociology graduate students why the scene kids congregated at Starbucks, they told me that the teens wanted to be seen, though not by everyone. “They know,” one explained, “that the audience there won’t be judging them.” Another added with a laugh, “they know that there won’t be any women in headscarves there . . . wondering why they are dressed that way and why they aren’t studying.” Their peers are the ones who will see them and their clothes.

Literally away from their elders, metaphorically out of Singapore, and perhaps in the virtual United States, these young people dressed in their provocative T-shirts and skin-tight jeans remade themselves into independent, cosmopolitan, and modern consumers—people different than their parents. What the Malay teens I saw on the terrace at the Orchard Road Starbucks were doing was leaving their public housing flats in Singapore and coming to America, an America at least partially of their own making. They came to this “coffee joint” (as Western caffeine dispensers are called in Asia) to act like adults, autonomous individuals apart from their communities and their parents. They spoke to their parents in an idiom that they took from America and from Starbucks.

When I asked several sociologists and Malay studies scholars in Singapore about the Malay teens at Starbucks, they told me that their parents probably owned their own shops and were perhaps first-generation college graduates. Thus, they were not the poorest of the poor in this somewhat dispossessed community; they were from families well on their way to the middle class. Most of the parents of the Starbucks teens, the scholars explained, saw their success as the product of diligence and hard work (if you are Malay remember, many would say, you have to put out twice the effort to make it), combined with the finely honed skills of thrift and frugality. That is what they preached to their children: vigilance and moderation.

Starbucks speaks a different language. With its designer lighting, wide overstuffed velvet chairs, softball-sized muffins, and over-priced coffee, Starbucks celebrates excess. By drinking an expensive mocha frappuccino topped with whipped cream and a drizzle of chocolate syrup and by “hanging out” for hours (clearly and publicly not working) on the veranda

²⁵ Elizabeth Gwee, “‘Dead’ Stretch Takes on New Life,” *Straits Times*, 16 Nov. 1997.

in front of Liat Towers, these teens turn their parents' values upside down. They present themselves as self-indulgent, leisurely characters with money to burn, raising questions about their parents' ethos of denial: that the path they laid out for success was not worth it in the end.²⁶

Parents and traditionalists do not miss the point of their children's public spending on coffee. They see it as an act of rebellion and a rejection of the past. Starbucks certainly did not introduce coffee culture to Singapore. *Kopitiam* (*kopi* is the Malay word for coffee, *tiam* for shop) dot every neighborhood and rest under every apartment building in the city. Each sells a plain, simple, cheap brew; there are few choices and no soft seating. "Here," writes Mun San, a local reporter, "you can hang out with your father in his unhip slippers and singlet without feeling you have committed a style crime." "It is not intimidating," a 43-year-old food consultant told him. "You won't feel the need to be too polite or cool." Daniel Ang, however, saw something else at work at the simple open-air coffee shops. "Someone who hasn't sipped a kopi . . . in a dirty but totally unpretentious kopitiam," he argued, "cannot be considered truly Singaporean." For him going to Starbucks (and to other Western-style coffee houses) represented something of a renunciation of the nation. The coffee joint customers were the "quitters" and "cosmopolitans" matched up against the "stayers" and "heartlanders" in a larger cultural debate going on in Singapore that pitted loyalty to the nation and its traditions against loyalty to ethnoses and values of the global market.²⁷

I heard a similar story, tied together with similar logic, while doing my research. My companion on my Singapore trip, a Chicago-born provost at one of the United States' "public ivies" recounted for me a conversation he had with a close friend, a politically moderate Singaporean Indian with a Ph.D. in economics. The American asked his friend how his brother—a fortyish lawyer—is doing. The man made a face and said, "Oh, he is one of those guys who spends \$3 on coffee," adding quickly, "Chinese coffee isn't good enough for him." He was saying that his brother has become too westernized. Surely, he would shake his head at those Malay teens at Starbucks. They would speak to him in a troubling Western idiom that he would clearly translate as a rejection of the cultural values and traditions of his country. That, in fact, represents part of the appeal of Starbucks.

²⁶ On the appeal of excess and America in the Asian context, see Chua, "Consuming Asians: Ideas and Issues," 13-16.

²⁷ Mun San, "Kopi Connection," *Straits Times*, 20 May 2007. For more on the coffee tradition in Singapore, see Tan Ern Tzeh Favian, "Coffee Shops in Singapore: Organization Death, Birth, and Survival," (Honors Thesis, Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1997-1998); and "The Business Tree," episode 4, available at the National University of Singapore Library. The notion of "quitters" vs. "stayers" comes from a speech delivered by Singapore prime minister Goh Chok Tong, 18 Aug. 2002. URL: <http://www.gov.sg/nd/ND02.htm>.

English is the official language at Starbucks. All the signs are in English, the brochures about social responsibility above the milk, sugar, and cinnamon shakers are in English, and the smiling baristas speak English. Noted Singaporean ethnographer and shopping expert Chua Beng Huat told me that English, further, defines Starbucks as a middle-class place. By drinking at Starbucks, therefore, Malay teens identify themselves with notions of success that suggest that the rewards for work are consumption, not saving. They also identify with Western-centered values of individualism. By drinking at Starbucks, Malay teens seem to be saying that they aspire to a life of comfort marked by what Singapore commentators have dubbed the five Cs: Cash, Credit cards, Car, Condo, and Country club.²⁸ Few of the scene kids can afford all of those items, so they engage in what sociologist Chua called “life styling.” Even though they almost certainly took public transportation to get to Starbucks and paid for their drinks in cash, not yet having a car or credit card or a membership in a country club, they could afford designer coffee and certainly a cell phone. They drank the expensive beverages as representations of their aspirations, of their dreams of success as measured by buying.²⁹

None of the Malay teens at Starbucks engaged in functional consumption. No one purchased a brewed coffee to go or a pound of coffee to take home. Again, they were engaged in aspirational consumption, buying as a representation not of who they were, but of who they wanted to be at some point in their lives. However, their middle-class dreams of lavish consumption took place in Singapore, and the products they bought were meant to talk to Singaporeans. They did not, it seems, imagine themselves in Seattle, nor were they trying to pass themselves off as Americans.³⁰

Most of the young Malay scene kids grew up in a Singapore world dominated by family and community. They were taught that they belonged to the group first. This was surely comforting to many, yet it could also be confining. As one Malay woman in her twenties told me: “We get together with family once a week or once a month,” adding “that’s when the policing takes place.” Parents tried to make sure that teens conformed to a traditional model of community-first behavior. Starbucks, though, trades on a different set of images and values. Like the stout cowboys, swashbuckling entrepreneurs, and freedom-loving hippies that rove the American cultural landscape, it celebrates the individual.

²⁸ Li Xueying, Goh Chin Lian, and Keith Lin, “Singapore Dreaming: The Other 5Cs—Cash, Credit Card, Car, Condo, Country Club. Clichéd,” *Straits Times*, 4 Nov. 2006.

²⁹ See Ong’s comments at URL: <http://www.makansutra.com/Makranzine/may00/youth.html>.

³⁰ Chua, *Life Is Not Complete without Shopping*.

Compare this to the neighborhood kopitiam. There, all seats are fair game. People will sit down next to you, without even asking. Waiters patrol the place. Starbucks, however, is at once a freer and more private place, perfect for teen (and individual) role-playing. At Starbucks, you serve yourself, seat yourself, and get to occupy your own space. No waiters (adults) are there to monitor and regulate what you do. At the kopitiam, there are only a few coffee combinations: white or black, sugar or no sugar. Busy waiters plop the generic drinks down on the table without a word or a smile or a question about how your day is going.

Starbucks, by contrast, offers thousands of possible drink combinations. You can get anything from a black coffee to more personalized and specialized beverages such as a grande decaf skim mocha latte extra hot, no whip with foam in a venti cup.³¹ “Make It Your Drink,” says the sign over the counter at the Orchard Road Starbucks where the Malay teens congregated.

Starbucks’ interior design strikes more chords of individuality. Even though all company stores have the same color schemes and furniture, no two Starbucks are exactly alike. The Orchard Road store is not laid out like the Holland Village outlet. You get comforting predictability and reassuring difference at the same time.

Maybe even more important, unlike at McDonald’s or Burger King, you can move the chairs at Starbucks, allowing for endless possible ways to organize the store. Chairs that move convey a potentially important message. They symbolize casualness and loose rules. That is not official Singapore, where, as everyone knows, the authorities sometimes cane people. Above all, the flexible seating represents a kind of freedom, which is, in turn, the central appeal of America to the young. Since Louis Armstrong first swung, Elvis first rocked, and MTV first pictured the rollicking irreverence of rap, teens around the globe have looked to America as a beacon of freedom: not political freedom so much as day-to-day freedom from rules and limits.

Malay teens arrived in groups, their numbers shrinking and growing by the minute. The pack sat together for a while, everyone talking at once. They pulled out their boxes of Marlboros and took short, tentative drags. Cell phones rang out to the tune of doorbells, rap songs, or other individualized sounds. A few more friends came in and pulled up chairs. Then a boy and a girl wandered off to another table, sitting close, sneaking quick kisses. After a while, they would rejoin the conversation and the smoking at the base table.

For an older generation of people around the world, the omnipresent Marlboro Man embodied the dream of rugged individualism in the face of

³¹ Drink description comes from Patricia Volk, “Latte on the Hudson,” *New York Times*, 21 Sept. 2003.

industrial sameness. For today's global citizen-consumers, Starbucks offers its own highly corporate template of freedom. Being a teenager means being caught in the middle of life, between being a child and a grownup. Often 14- and 15-year-olds express their desire for independence by emulating adults and adult consumption patterns. At Starbucks, Chinese and European adults surround the scene kids. These adults are not members of the teens' own rather close-knit communities, and they seem, with venti drinks in hand, to overspend on cars, vacations, razor-thin cell phones, and coffee. The teens do not have that freedom, but they can go to Starbucks and overspend in a more accessible way, in public where others in their peer group can see them and associate them with the successful adults sitting around them.

For Malay teens in jeans and T-shirts, then, Starbucks is that aspirational place where they are free to act like adults, adults unlike their tradition-bound parents. "It's our hang-out," one 17-year-old Singaporean announced, "because it's cool to be seen here." Another teen told a journalist, that Starbucks had "cool music" and that it was where "cool people hang out."³² After spending some time at Starbucks, a Japanese journalist wrote that teenagers in his country saw the coffee company as a symbol of "an exciting, fashionable, contemporary lifestyle that breaks free from constraining local traditions."³³ The same surely can be said of Malay teens along Orchard Road; Starbucks is part of their declaration of freedom and their desire to be seen, not marginalized, and to spend, not to save as their parents do.

Freedom comes packaged in other ways at Starbucks. At the Starbucks on Orchard Road, the music was American, mostly African American music. Dinah Washington coos, "Let's Do it." Ray Charles calls out, "That's All Right!" Sly Stone leads his big band in a rowdy version of "I Want to Take you Higher."

It is as if Starbucks officials in Singapore decided on the soundtrack for their stores just after they finished reading Norman Mailer's at once famous and infamous essay, "The White Negro." In this revealing and disturbing insight into postwar thinking, the one-time bad boy of American letters portrays African Americans as the freest Americans. In their poverty, rural ways, and marginality, they became to him the most authentic, real, and liberated of Americans. Although Mailer was in his twenties when he wrote this piece, it has a kind of restless (white and middle-class) teen spirit running through it. The dominant culture (usually in the form of parents) places constraints, even repression, on

³² "And the Smells Come Free," *Straits Times*, 17 Nov. 1988.

³³ Quoted in Craig J. Thompson and Zeyneb Arsel, "The Starbucks Brandscape and Consumers' (Anticorporate) Experiences of Globalization," *Journal of Consumer Research* 31 (Dec. 2004): 640.

teens. As the quintessential outsiders, African Americans, in Mailer's eyes, lived the freest lives: They got drunk, they sang, and they had sex. Blues, rap, jazz, and R & B (rhythm and blues)—“black” music—has always allowed whites to participate vicariously in the black world as Mailer imagined it.³⁴ Starbucks surely knows this music is the perfect backdrop for the kinds of muted youth rebellions against conformity, marginality, and traditional familial systems of hierarchy and authority playing out on the coffee house terrace in Singapore.³⁵

The Starbucks below the Liat Towers on Orchard Road is marked as much, in the end, by who does not go there as it is by who does. The pressure to act “cool,” for instance, puts off 43-year-old K. F. Seetoh, so he sticks with the kopitiam where he can sip coffee, and “drink half-boiled eggs from a saucer and no one will be bothered.”³⁶ In the United States, at least before the George W. Bush-era crash on Wall Street, construction workers with dusty boots and middle managers in rubber-soled loafers could both be seen at Starbucks. The company's own statistics reveal an increased popularity of the brand with the solidly middle class.³⁷

As I sat on the terrace of the Orchard Road Starbucks, I noticed three slightly overweight women in their mid-thirties approach. None had on the uniform of the youth brigade, designer jeans and T-shirts, nor were they dressed like bankers or business people. One of the women wore a slightly stained, loose-fitting, faded shirt that said nothing about Justin or New York. They stood outside the store, debated whether or not to go inside. Finally, they entered the store; a minute or so later, they were back out on the street. They had not bought anything. Perhaps it was too expensive, perhaps they could not figure out the menu's language, or maybe they did not fit in, or want to fit in, with the crowd. Maybe they did not want to look or even pretend to be upper middle class.

In the United States and in England, parents and their teenage children often go to Starbucks. Martin Kupferman does not really like Starbucks. At the start of the coffeehouse boom in the United States, he owned Pasquas, a small chain of San Francisco espresso bars. Starbucks

³⁴ Norman Mailer, “The White Negro,” *Dissent* (Spring 1957), available at <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=26>.

³⁵ On U.S. culture and how it can work as a form of rebellion, see Petra Goedde, “The Globalization of American Culture” (forthcoming; in author's possession); and Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000).

³⁶ June Cheong, Tee Cheng Wee, and Mak Mun San, “The Humble Kopitiam Remains Hugely Popular Despite Big Name Foreign Coffee Chains Setting Up in Almost Every Mall,” *Straits Times*, 20 May 2007.

³⁷ Frank Kern, former public relations official, email to author, 12 April 2007.

bought him out and the deal produced some bad blood. Still, on many Saturdays, Kupferman finds himself at a Starbucks sitting across the table from his teenage daughter. This is the only place she likes to go and the only place where she will talk with him, so he goes there with her.

Nowadays, it is as if Starbucks has become a kind of cultural middle ground in the United States and in parts of Europe, but not in Singapore, and definitely not among Malays. Starbucks for Malays is a more contested, even oppositional, site. During my observations, not only did I see almost no one who looked poor or unfit; I saw almost no one over sixty at the Starbucks. The daughter of a Malay woman who always wore a headdress told me that her mother would never go to Starbucks. She would see it and the people there as “frivolous and wasteful” and wonder why the teens there did not put on “decent clothes.” So while Orchard Road stands as the city’s busiest shopping street—a meeting place and neutral territory for many—the outside terrace of the Liat Towers Starbucks serves as something else. In Malay households, it is a lightning rod; parents and teens cannot always agree about it, except to acknowledge that it means something about family and faith, culture and consumption, community and globalization. That, in many ways, is the point. The use of the global in this context is as an adjective in local conversations.

Malay teens express their desires at Starbucks: desires to break out on their own, surround themselves with luxuries, and turn themselves into autonomous individuals. Global culture and products are a resource here. Even more to the point, their consumption represents a kind of fashion statement. In a world where we are—in the eyes of many, but especially of teenagers—what we buy, we form identity through purchases and their display. This is surely not a democratic world. Therefore, while the context for this conversation along Orchard Road might be less about Freidman’s flat world than the everyday, immediate world of the dinner table and living room of Malay households, it is still about the cultural and economic power of the United States. As Malay teens search for ways to express their identity, they go shopping for things and images. Much of what they see is generated in the United States, and much of it celebrates the virtues of consumption: choice and individualism through the not quite free choice of nonstop buying. That they embrace these ideas and this form of expression is as significant as it is complicated. Choice about what to buy and what to wear is never free, not in a capitalist economy.

There is one final thing to keep in mind about consumption and globalization, something forgotten by Mickey Mouse theorists and the glass breakers. Identity making through culture—becoming modern, or American, or just distinguishing oneself from parents by drinking a vanilla latte at Starbucks—is often transitory. Before heading out to Orchard Road on Sunday afternoons, Malay scene kids put on the costumes of the MTV generation. On Monday, however, they might get ready for another week of classes and wear more traditional garb or a school uniform. Consump-

tion is surely loaded with meanings, and consumers can certainly play with and rearrange those meanings to a certain extent, but buying and displaying items is also, as the trailblazing sociologist Erving Goffman suggested in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, a form of play-acting.³⁸ It is a way to try on roles, strike a pose, and experiment with who you are and who you want to be. So going to Starbucks might be about the production of a Sunday self, not a Monday self. Alternatively, it could be a stage in a life. Then again, it might also be a dress rehearsal for who a person wants to be and who he or she will become. Wherever this performance happens, context matters. Not all the world is flat. Maybe it is a stage, all of us are actors, and all our purchases are props.

³⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, 1993).