

Coffee Life in Japan. By Merry White. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012. xii, 222 pages. \$63.00, cloth; \$26.95, paper; \$26.95, E-book.

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Japanese visitors to cafés are there “to watch and take note,” so writes Merry White (p. xi) in an absorbing book about coffee and cafés in Japan. White compares her stance to that of these imaginary café visitors. The author is well present in the book, which can be read, at least in part, as an ethnography, or at any rate as an ethnographic memoir, summarizing the long path of the anthropologist of Japan through the alleys of coffee. The rich descriptions of these journeys are indeed one of the merits of the book. The reader travels with the anthropologist from nostalgic venues such as Tokyo’s Kahiichakan, Japan’s first coffeehouse of record, which is now marked only by a monument, to contemporary “exotic” or hidden cafés. How can one resist the rich firsthand description of the frequent visits of the anthropologist, coffee lover, and visitor to venues such as the Ryugetsudo café in Kyoto, which continues to do business today apparently virtually unchanged since the 1950s? Customers in this classical music café (*meikyoku kissa*; literally, “important” or “famous” music café) are not allowed to speak nor to make any other noise while sipping their coffee, and stuffed animals such as teddy bears used for better acoustics may be caught sitting in the laps of mainly elderly men as they listen to one of the more than over eight thousand records in the café’s collection (pp. 61–62). The “thick description” embedded in the ethnographer’s own physical and emotional experience makes the cafés so attractive that I will surely look for them in my next trips to Japan. This book, which also contains photographs, is an inviting one for those interested in Japan and in coffee culture in general.

However, White attempts a project larger than an ethnographic account of what she identifies as “coffee life” in Japan. The book’s treatment of coffee and café in Japan includes four themes: the social history of cafés; an ethnographic treatment of cafés as urban spaces; the development of coffee as a commercial industry; and the culture of coffee itself, including coffee as an object of work, connoisseurship, and artisanal practice (as stated on p. 7). The author’s endeavor to construct a solid line of narrative from the first tastings of coffee brought by missionaries and traders to Japan in the sixteenth century to the ubiquity of coffeehouses in current times cannot be missed by the reader. White offers a totalizing description according to which “the story of the first coffeehouse in Japan illuminates the later paths coffee and the café have taken in Japan” (p. 7).

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There is no doubt that White, who has been engaged with the study of Japanese society and culture for many and productive years, is one of the few scholars of Japan who could take upon herself such a challenge. This attempt at building a single narrative that goes from the Portuguese and Dutch trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through the colonial exchanges in the late 1800s, into the Western city life that began in the early twentieth century, and up to the corners of the urban space in today's Japan is indeed thought provoking and at times also rewarding, especially in its abundance of rich historical and ethnographic stories, anecdotes, and personas. It is also useful for dispelling a number of stereotypes about Japanese culture, especially the one about Japan as a country of tea. This book represents the victory of coffee over tea. We learn not only that modern Japan is the third largest coffee-consuming country in the world but also that the global expansion of the coffee industry was originally triggered by the rise of coffee drinking in Japan in the early twentieth century.

However, White's insistence on providing a single line for the story of coffee in Japan seems to be also the source of some of the book's weaker points. One of these is its structure and organization. Clearly, one should not simply expect a linear story flowing from past to present. Nevertheless, while reading the book it is hard not to notice what can be regarded as an excessive effort to combine past and present which at times leads to unnecessary repetition or to a lack of sufficient context. White obviously seeks to present a picture of diversity, as epitomized in an early pictorial paragraph that covers different cafés as well as different geographical regions in Japan. It begins with two students struggling to prepare their assignment in a modernist café on the banks of the river in Kyoto, goes through a coffee master in his mid-nineties commanding silence in his dark mahogany café in Tokyo, then continues to three retired construction workers sharing space in a 1960s café in Nagoya, not before it passes by a girl carefully sipping her decaf caramel macchiato in Starbucks (pp. 2–3). But, in the end, diversity is one of the things the book lacks.

The single story line that White tries to draw is embedded in an even stronger attempt to emphasize the Japaneseness of coffee in Japan. This is certainly not the same mythical "unique Japaneseness" of the *Nihonjinron* for which both Japanese and Western scholars of Japan have been blamed.¹ It is instead an attempt to normalize coffee as part of the normalization of modernity in Japan. Coffee has been described by Elise Tipton as one of the epitomes of "modernity."² However, Tipton's analysis, which is often

1. Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

2. Elise Tipton, "The Café: Contested Space of Modernity in Interwar Japan," in Elise K. Tipton and John Clark, eds., *Being Modern in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), pp. 119–35.

referred to in the book, focuses on a different period. In the context of the early twentieth century, it was indeed European modernity that established itself in Japan after being presented earlier as one of the “available modernities” for Japan to adopt.³ But, the question remains whether “modernity” supplies a satisfactory explanation also in the context of Japan of the twenty-first century, as White argues. The author, it seems, puts herself in the position of undaunted defender not only of Japanese coffee but also of Japanese modernity. This position as it combines with the single narrative she tries to construct does not leave much room for real diversity. “From places for ‘Western’ experiences, coffeehouses gradually became places for modernity—Japanese modernity” (p. 162); but, is this the only modernity in Japan today? And what exactly is this “Japanese modernity”?

Although White mentions the recent phenomenon of chain cafés in Japan, including fleeting references to Starbucks, which has gained great economic as well as cultural success, the book in fact ignores, at least theoretically, this category of cafés and their social and cultural impact and meaning. These venues and the culture they represent and produce seem not to fit into the totalizing argument about the normal, that is, non-Western modernity that White develops in the book. Helena Grinshpun offers a different perspective on the same topic. Grinshpun questions White’s attempt to entirely naturalize Japanese cafés. She contends with White’s view that the acquired “normality” of the café and its ability to cater to local needs contradicts its early association with foreign culture. Grinshpun alternatively suggests that the cultural “baggage” of coffee as a foreign commodity still plays a central role in generating its consumer appeal.⁴

Granted, Grinshpun’s study focuses on chain coffee, which is certainly not the main focus of White’s study. Nonetheless, it seems that while White does relate to coffee as “the first truly globalized commodity,” her overemphasized point about “normality,” which seems to imply to her the loss of any Western-culture odor, blinds her view of a whole spectrum of theories of cultural incorporation and globalization that could have been useful for a discussion that gives more space to diversity.

Globalization in the context of Japan has been widely discussed and not only for shedding light on Japan as an importer of goods and ideas instead of merely a passive receiver, as offered by Harumi Befu.⁵ The “Japanese” and the “Western,” and the relationship between them, have been described

3. Carol Gluck, “Japan and Modernity: From History to Theory,” lecture presented at Harvard University, March 12, 2009; cited on p. 32.

4. See Helena Grinshpun, “Deconstructing a Global Commodity: Coffee, Culture, and Consumption in Japan,” *Journal of Consumer Culture*, published online May 22, 2013.

5. Harumi Befu, “The Global Context of Japan outside Japan,” in Harumi Befu and Sylvie Guichard-Anguis, eds., *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in America, Asia and Europe* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 3–22.

in more dynamic terms, as part of “an ongoing process of producing new cultural forms,”⁶ or as a “movement of culture,” which allows metaphorical “code-switching.”⁷ White’s analysis does not leave space for such dynamic approaches to culture.

Then again, the strength of the book lies in its ethnographic parts. White may have sensed this herself when choosing its title as an homage to Ronald Dore’s classical ethnographic monograph, *City Life in Japan* (University of California Press, 1958). White’s ethnographic muscle is best, in my opinion, when she relates to people, that is, to “real” people such as coffee masters whom she seems to have known for years, and not to the imaginary visitors to cafés along the long coffee history in Japan. Chapter 4, “Masters of Their Universes,” is such an ethnographic gem. It begins with a quote of one such master: “I am successful in my café if my customers know that every cup of coffee I make will be made by my hand with my *kodawari*” (p. 66). *Kodawari* is an unrelenting, exhaustive, uncompromising devotion to a chosen small area of expertise, which can be observed in other areas of craftsmanship in Japan but is often used with relation to food. As White emphasizes, the perfection is not in the cup of coffee but in the master himself (or, more rarely, herself), who ideally becomes the “embodiment of the desire for the ultimate coffee experience.” *Kodawari* is also good business; it can be used as a reason for charging more. *Kodawari*, which is a term often heard in Japan, can easily be interpreted as one more exotic trait marking “Japanese uniqueness,” but White succeeds by not falling into the *Nihonjinron* trap. Her description is thick enough to make this reader feel as though she is sitting in these masters’ cafés along with White and listening to them describe their love of their trade while sipping their excellent coffee. As White is also careful to contextualize this emic or local meaning of *kodawari*, which appears in other contexts in Japan, we gain a better understanding of the term. A marked addition is the belief that the perfection described by *kodawari* is not one you achieve but one you only strive for; this definition joins our ongoing endeavor to learn more about this culture. Thus, White makes a significant contribution to the anthropological study of Japanese society and culture.

Finally, one of the main strengths of the book is the fascinating social history of coffee and cafés in Japan that it offers. The illuminating details about the early discovery and love for coffee in Japan, which may be sur-

6. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, “The Making and Marking of the ‘Japanese and the ‘Western’ in Japanese Contemporary Material Culture,” *Journal of Material Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2001), pp. 67–90.

7. Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

prising at least for some readers, are also usually backed by rich ethnography. The book ends with a list of select cafés in the Tokyo and Kyoto areas that may appeal to those interested in Japanese urban culture as well as to those who want to know more about coffee and coffee culture in Japan and beyond.

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