As American civic institutions crumbled in the 1980s, we stopped congregating in churches, school boards, neighborhood clubs, and bowling leagues. We stayed at home and became isolated, and soon we craved other ways to socialize. We wanted to feel like we were connected to culture, contributing to society, and part of a community. In our “civically challenged world” (p.5), we did so through consumption.

Everything but the Coffee catalogs Starbucks’ success through its promise to fill these voids. Author Bryant Simon also addresses Starbucks’ decline—in 2006 the company’s stock price began dropping, and two years later it closed hundreds of stores—but for the most part he tells the story of a coffee chain reaching ubiquity by selling “community and belonging, retail therapy and emotional perks…and global good feelings” (p.19).

In each chapter Simon focuses on one of Starbucks’ offerings, weaving in a portion of the company’s story in the process. He starts with the dark, flavorful coffee sold at the original coffee shop in Seattle’s Pike Place Market. When the store opened in 1971, it was part of a soft rebellion against industrialized food; an interview with co-founder Jerry Baldwin sets the scene of the West Coast’s natural-food counterculture of the 1970s, a more wholesome (and consumptive) version of 1960s activism. Simon introduces Howard Schultz, the business-minded outsider who would eventually take over Starbucks. But after this short backstory, Simon turns to the story you already know: Starbucks’ shift from selling small-batch coffee to sugary lattes to Frappuccinos and their mass-marketed ilk.

The same can be said for much of the book: Simon dedicates more than half of his pages to telling a story we already know. He is impressively thorough; he has read every piece of the company’s corporate literature, studied their training manuals, interviewed employees, and memo- rized its menu in all its “Italianesque lingua franca” (a wonderful phrase), and he relays this information to the reader. The problem is that we don’t need thirty pages of description to understand that Starbucks thrives on the idea of customers “self-gifting” with small, everyday luxuries such as four-dollar lattes; or that its roster of in-store music shies away from controversial artists; or that there is a business agenda beneath the company’s promises of supporting fair trade and environmental efforts. Simon treats these facts as revelatory, presenting hundreds of pages of evidence for an argument that needs none: that Starbucks is a profit-driven business, not an altruistic, civic institution.

This squeezes out the most intriguing part of Simon’s investigation, the chapter that begins to deliver on his titular promise of “learning about America.” Starbucks posits itself as a “third place,” a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg to mean a gathering place other than work or home. In Oldenburg’s vision, people interact with folks they wouldn’t otherwise meet in their everyday lives. However, in Starbucks’ version these interactions don’t actually happen. Customers sit at personal tables or in overstuffed chairs spaced just far enough apart to inhibit conversation while still creating the illusion of community. The customers are props meant to make a Starbucks café look like a third place, even though it doesn’t act like one.

Simon’s Starbucks research is most captivating when he ties it to other works, such as studies by sociologists Faith Popcorn and Robert Putnam. He picks up where they left off, with Americans’ withdrawal from civic institutions in the 1980s and 1990s. As crime rates dropped, Simon writes, these “cocooned” Americans reemerged, and upon finding their civic institutions depleted, they looked for community in consumerism, branding themselves with iPods and Starbucks coffee cups. Here, Simon avoids the unnecessary dismantling of Starbucks’ corporate narratives that hampers his other chapters, which leaves room for a full, rich argument.

In the end, however, the book is almost entirely about Starbucks, not America. What is strange—and I must spoil the ending here—is that Simon acknowledges this. The book ends, and he never revisits his thesis about desires and consumption in post-9/11 America, about the decline of civic institutions and the corporations that supplanted them. Instead of a conclusion he writes an eight-page afterword about a conversation he had with a friend as he neared the book’s completion. When Simon began the project, he writes, he was naive about Starbucks’ profit-driven altruism. As he did more research, he got increasingly angry about the disparity between their marketing and their actions. “[T]he focus of the book was changing and moving too far from a study of consumption…to a rather one-dimensional account of corporate greed and manipulation—an old yarn, really,” he writes (p.244). He also writes that his friend’s feedback got him off the path of “the Michael Moore–style documentary filled with easy-to-knock-down straw men” (p.245). Simon recognized that he was straying from his thesis, and he changed, he writes. Except that he didn’t. The book ends without conclusion, save for a final straw thought that maybe the current economic downturn will restore...
By the time you finish reading *A Tortilla Is Like Life* by noted food anthropologist Carole M. Counihan, you feel as though you have traveled to the small town of Antonito in the remote southern San Luis Valley of Colorado and shared leisurely conversations with its women residents about changes in their land, livelihoods, food, and culture over the course of their lives. In this beautiful feminist ethnography, the author has created a forum for women’s voices and experiences, providing her readers with an intimate perspective on their community. Counihan spent eight summers with her family in Antonito and distills her extensive field notes and interviews into eleven chapters. The chapter titles juxtapose women’s direct quotes alongside topical subtitles, as in “Anything You Want Is Going to Come from the Earth”: The Traditional Diet” and “We’ve Got to Provide for the Family: Women, Food, and Work.” The result is 253 pages of what Counihan calls “food-centered life histories.” The Antonito women are her “research partners,” free to turn the tape recorder off and on as well as correct and delete transcriptions, and the final product is an engaging collaborative enterprise.

We begin with a map of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico that provides the spatial context for a discussion about the changing meanings of land and water, and the foodways and people they support. Antonito was registered as 90 percent Hispanic in the 2000 census. Place names on the map such as the Rio Grande River and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains are testimony to the region’s roots in what was part of Mexico until the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, when the country was forced to cede nearly half of its territory to the United States. This history sets the stage for the complex ethnic identities expressed by Counihan’s subjects, some of whom trace their family origins and land ownership to that period and consider themselves Spanish, and others who identify with Native American ancestry or the Chicano political movement. Musing on the associated, confusing terminology, one collaborator, Teddy Madrid (b. 1934), says she calls herself Hispanic in English and Mexicana in Spanish (p.40). Counihan adopts the latter, a self-referent for Hispanic Americans from Antonito, not to be confused with the English term “Mexican,” meaning from Mexico, an identity most rejected. Later, we learn how ethnic identities are maintained across religious differences through food shared during mourning rituals.

This work describes challenges faced by hard-working women living in a cold, dry region once dominated by a mixed farming and ranching subsistence economy. While some couples’ relationships were more egalitarian than others, feeding the family was “an important channel for enacting gender” (p.143), with women expected to be “preparers” and men “providers.” Cooking was always women’s duty and men’s choice. By describing food-related gender roles and divisions of labor, the author makes visible women’s work and agency while giving the reader a sense of daily and seasonal activities in kitchens, gardens, school cafeterias, the community Food Bank, and even the mountains. Readers glimpse some of the negotiations that occurred inside marriages when women did not want a life devoted to domestic chores. Some women applied skills from their home kitchens to paid jobs in food service, and some men used the cooking skills learned at sheep camp to help out in the home. Teddy’s husband began by cooking fish, eggs, beans, and potatoes and later ventured into making American cakes, Spanish *biscochitos*, and Mexican *tamales*. Helen (b. 1926) delayed marriage as long as she could to avoid the pressure that ensuing domestic expectations would put on her career as a teacher; she told Counihan that she was not “a kitchen guy” (p.118) and was happy with a husband who supported this choice by sharing the cooking.

Counihan concludes by describing Fourth of July meals in Antonito, with their combination of local and global, homemade and processed, and Mexican and American foods. She zooms out abruptly to the scale of the nation and switches from women’s stories of the past to her own analysis of factors affecting the Antonito diet today. The ending is a little disconcerting, particularly given the insider/outsider subtext that permeates the book. For readers of many ethnicities, however, these final pages may bring them closer to the inhabitants of this small town who are increasingly disconnected from their community’s cultural and natural heritage. The book culminates with a sense of loss symbolized by the child who misunderstood the word *maíz*—the Spanish word for corn—for “mice” (p.85).

—Maria Elisa Christie, Virginia Tech