

“Making Place” in Transitional Japan: Youth, *Konbini*, and Everyday Life

変わり行く日本における「居場所」とは：若者、コンビニ、そして彼らの日常生活

Gavin Hamilton Whitelaw, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of Anthropology & Sociology,
International Christian University (ICU)

**17:30, January 8 (Thu), 2009
Room 301, 3rd Floor,
Sophia University Building #10**

People living in Japan recognize the convenience store, or *konbini*, as an increasingly critical piece of social infrastructure—a 24-hour haven for paying bills, reading magazines, and buying *obentō*. But these stores are also an important cultural institution that frames, sometimes in overly determined ways, the aspirations and trajectories of the young people who frequent them. *Konbini* are geographically and metaphorically situated between home and school. As such, they have come to highlight the fissures in Japan’s postwar ideology and social structure, specifically the family and the nation’s once lauded education-to-work configuration. The proliferation of *konbini-baito* (part-time convenience store work), *konbini-shoku* (convenience cuisine) diets, and practices like hanging out (*tamuro*) around *konbini* turn Japan’s preeminent corner shop into a convenient site for moral panics and societal unease. But are *konbini* so deserving of this reputation? Beyond the comedian caricatures of *konbini* workers and social pundits eulogizing of Japan’s *shotengai-shakai* (shopping arcade society), how might these ubiquitous stores be playing a substantive role in redefining daily life in Japan today for youth in particular? In the following presentation, I draw on eighteen months of fieldwork as a store clerk to explore how *konbini* serve not simply as public space, but meaningful places of transition, reflection, and temporary belonging for young people learning to negotiate the “cool” and “*karyū*” (downward mobility) of the world they occupy.

Dr Whitelaw’s recent publications

- Whitelaw, Gavin Hamilton. 2008. Learning from Small Change: Clerkship and the Labors of Convenience. *Anthropology of Work Review*. (29)3:1-8 [in press].
- Whitelaw, Gavin Hamilton. 2007. At Your *Konbini* in Contemporary Japan: Modern Service, Local Familiarity, and the Global Transformation of the Convenience Store [doctoral dissertation]. New Haven: Yale University.
- Whitelaw, Gavin Hamilton. 2006. Rice Ball Rivalries: Japanese Convenience Stores and the Appetite of Late Capitalism. In *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*. Richard Wilk, ed. Pp. 131-144. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.