to a variety of cultural offerings in the world at large. Omnivorousness, that is, has to do with an impression of cultivation that comes not from allegiance to one form of culture alone but from absorption of many cultures: for instance, in music (where a lot of the sociological literature on omnivorousness has focused) the omnivore finds distinction not by liking just one form of music (classical music, say) but by being receptive to lots and lots of appreciable forms (say, classical music alongside jazz, world music, ethnic music, folk cultural music, and so on).

With Foodies, sociologists Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann return the concept of omnivorousness to the realm of food studies by examining how today’s foodies exhibit an openness to a multiplicity of food experiences that can seem liberal (or, in the authors’ term, democratic) but that is also potentially a way for boundaries of status and cultural distinction to be set up and tenaciously maintained. The authors trace a contemporary history of privileged investment in distinctive food that starts with the dethroning of stuffy, pretentious French food as the single standard for gustatory excellence and the promotion instead of multiple forms of food as potential paths to fine taste. It’s not so much that French food has somehow been revealed to be bad (although, in a seemingly democratic climate, devotion to it can sometimes seem retrograde, if not reactionary). It’s that, for the foodie, haute cuisine is not the only way that gustatory goodness can be achieved.

The foodie, as Johnston and Baumann argue, may still quite like a fancy meal at an upscale restaurant, but he or she is also quite open to the miraculous find of a roadside food shack or hole-in-the-wall off in the middle of nowhere. Today’s food-oriented status-seeker finds value in the seemingly simple, the folkloric, the local, the ethnically cultural. Examining the discourse of foodies, both through quantitative and qualitative analysis of upscale food journals (such as the now deceased Gourmet) and through interviews with self-identified food enthusiasts, Johnston and Baumann outline a series of common motifs in the ways foodies (and their preferred publications) represent their quest after tasteful experience. For example, a statistical analysis shows that many magazine stories are about connecting a wonderful dish or ingredient to a place of origin (the more exotic or folkloric or romantic the better), to inspiring stories about the people involved in the cuisine (and the meaningful legacies they partake of), to tropes of simplicity and anti-modernism (for example, as one story has it, hand-patted tortillas are better than machine-flattened ones), to mythologies of authenticity, and so on.

Importantly, as a means to cultural distinction, omnivorousness is not, as Johnston and Baumann clarify, about liking all cultural offerings: the opennessness to wide experience always has its limits and borders (upscale music lovers may like early but not late Sinatra, and most revile Muzak; foodies may like street food but not chain fast food, except as a “guilty pleasure”). The cultural omnivore needs to fix on practices that themselves can be invested with connotations of privilege, perfection, specialness, and so on, and not everything out in the world ultimately will make the grade. Omnivorousness may seem more generous than snobby fixation on one type of exclusive and exclusionary Culture, but it is also no less about drawing distinctions between “right” and “wrong” paths to taste.

No doubt, such conclusions will not be that surprising to anyone who reflects for a bit on the class structure and corresponding ideologies of foodie culture. As is perhaps often typical of research in sociology, the value of Johnston and Baumann’s scholarship lies less in any bold, new insights they come up with about how cultural distinction operates today than in the data and discourse analysis they marshal to capture and confirm the endurance of patterns of cultural uplift and division at work in modern society. Rich in anecdote and example, and quite readable (this, for one, is a work of sociology without an overload of jargon and statistical formulae), Foodies offers a quite useful context for the analysis of food’s ideological functions.

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Fat, Gluttony and Sloth: Obesity in Literature, Art and Medicine
David Haslam and Fiona Haslam
Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009
326 pp. Illustrations. $39.95 (paper)

This is an ambitious book, spanning three capacious spheres (literature, art, and medicine), and several centuries, albeit not consistently or systematically. Each chapter presents a theme in historical perspective, yet at times this history seems almost spurious—for instance, the dizzying speed at which the authors move from Apollonius of Memphis coining the term “diabetes” in 250 B.C. to Elvis, a sufferer of diabetes, dying of a heart attack in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1977 after years of a notorious high-caloric, high-fat diet (pp.21–22). The book is more interesting and historically coherent in other chapters. The authors’ discussion of the connections between excessive consumption of food and drink and the changing moral evaluations of such behavior over time are often compelling. The chapters on
gluttony and sloth convey a sense of the longevity of the revulsion and fascination with the corporeal embodiment of excess. Another strong chapter is “Popular Images of Obesity,” which ranges from eighteenth-century satirist Hogarth to joke postcards of obese bathers from seaside resorts in early twentieth-century Britain.

The book may be a find for those who are fascinated by fat trivia. For instance, for those who have a hankering to revisit the iconic “Fat Lady in the Circus,” there is a chapter entitled “Fat Folk on Show.” The authors rightly note that these early fairs are precursors to the “modern day freak shows” of contemporary television weight-loss shows. For a book that claims to unpack prejudices about obesity, it certainly hits on all of the classic stories that many of us thought were apocryphal. Take the phrase “he/she was so fat that…” and fill in the blank with one of the following answers offered in the book: “he fell through the floorboards” (p.34); “he was buried in a piano case” (p.35); or “a television remote control was said to have been discovered hidden between the folds of her flesh” (p.37). We are told of the untimely death of the obese woman who choked on her own vomit (p.55); of the young man who broke the industrial scale when they tried to weigh him (p.12); and of the obese mother and son who had to be “evicted from their home by a fork lift truck” (p.34).

The authors, David Haslam, chair and clinical director of the United Kingdom’s National Obesity Forum and physician of “obesity management,” and Fiona Haslam, a former medical practitioner and scholar of the relationship between medicine and art, are flippant in parts—as when they describe the quack weight-loss techniques of the past, dangerous ones like arsenic, mercury, and tobacco, or uncomfortable, ineffective ones like soap enemas, which were believed to emulsify fat (p.153), or when they query whether a prehistoric figure like the Venus of Willendorf was a fertility symbol or a prehistoric “Playgirl of the Month” (p.86). Yet their often amusing or intriguing anecdotes, examples, and illustrations are interspersed with dire reminders that obesity is a chronic disease with various unsavory “co-morbidities” like heart disease and diabetes. Every story of a seemingly healthy, happy fat person seems to be followed by a stern reminder of his or her sudden early death. The dangers of visceral abdominal fat and inactivity are mentioned repeatedly, ultimately privileging the “truth” of the contemporary science of medicine over literary, moral, or pictorial representations and interpretations of fat.

The book has but the loosest of an overarching argument, although to be fair, readers are alerted early that the book is “not intended to engage with critical theory or analysis” (p.8). The authors’ assertion that “Present-day food, fashion, fads and fat cannot be dissociated from history” (p.11) is true enough, as far as it goes. They suggest that by learning lessons from “mistakes” of the past, we might move in progressive directions for the preservation of health in the future. In the introduction, the authors claim that when obesity has been eradicated, like smallpox, the importance of this book will be “documenting its rise, prior to its fall” (p.3). However, the book ends less optimistically with an account of memento mori (Remember thou shalt die) images over time and suggests that we need a new set of memento mori images for the twenty-first century as, they warn us, the “Fat, Gluttonous and Slothful are still dancing, or dicing, with Death” (p.292). Like a dish of pure fat, the book is rich but ultimately unsatisfying, and definitely not for the faint of heart or the queasy.

—Anne Meneley, Trent University

Steeped in History: The Art of Tea
Edited by Beatrice Hohenegger
Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at ucla, 2009
236 pp. Illustrations. $40.00 (paper)

“What do we think about when we think of tea?” asks Elizabeth Kolsky in the final line of this catalogue of an exhibition at UCLA’s Fowler Museum (p.215). For many, the answer might involve either the casual comfort of a fragrantly steaming mug or the old-fashioned elegance of fine china and crustless sandwiches. These essays by eleven scholars complicate such popular associations with richly documented discussions of the material culture and social, economic, and political history of the most widely consumed beverage in the world.

The book consists of four sections that explore the production, circulation, and meanings of tea in diverse cultures and periods. The first section begins with Steven D. Owyong’s survey of the changing roles of tea in China since the eleventh century B.C.E., including its preparation, medicinal uses, aesthetics, and significance in Daoist philosophy and imperial economies. Tradition meets contemporary practice in the following chapter, with Terese Tse Bartholomew’s personal account of a trip to Yixing to learn ancient artisanal methods of teapot manufacture.

The second section shifts the narrative to Japan, where tea was introduced in the ninth century by Buddhist monks who had studied in China. Dennis Hirota explains how aspects of three different Buddhist traditions shaped