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Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism
Julie Guthman
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011 xi + 248 pp. $24.95 (cloth)

In Weighing In, Julie Guthman carefully unearths the neoliberal assumptions about bodies, environments, and socioeconomic relations that shape contemporary discourses and policy frameworks around obesity and “the obesity epidemic.” A scholar of food systems and political economy, Guthman positions her second book as a political ecology of obesity, and she argues that any comprehensive discussion of obesity must account for the political, economic, and cultural politics that define and demarcate fat bodies.

Guthman does not refute the claim that Americans have gained weight since the 1980s (as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have alarmingly reported). However, Weighing In posits that the so-coined obesity epidemic is an “artifact of particular measures, statistical conventions, epidemiological associations, and rhetorical moves” (p.25)—an artifact, that is, of inadequate tools (such as Body Mass Index) that judge bodies on a scale of normality rather than pathology. Guthman argues that moral and aesthetic judgments against fat bodies have skewed the way scientists, public health officials, food activists, and the general public all articulate the problem of obesity. In her words, “existing assumptions about [obesity’s] causes, consequences, and solutions are built into existing efforts to assess it independently as a problem” (p.23). At the same time, the contemporary ideologies of healthism and lifestylism shame fat people in the United States for failing to “pursue health” and thus reflect a neoliberal belief that only subjects who practice proper self-governance merit full access to citizenship rights.

Weighing In is organized around a set of questions that critique current explanations of obesity in the medical, public health, and locavore communities. Guthman challenges
three claims: that “our neighborhoods make us fat,” that “eating too much makes us fat,” and that food policy and “farm subsidies make us fat.” Against public proselytizing about food deserts on the one hand and overconsumption of cheap food on the other, Weighing In pushes us to consider new explanations for obesity. In particular, Guthman’s primary research, which draws from the methods of both political ecology and science and technology studies (STS), shows environmental pollutants (obesogenic endocrine disruptors in particular), racism and class inequities, and the capitalistic logic of industrial agriculture to be integral factors in one’s weight that are noticeably absent from the effort to address obesity via behavior modification and public health campaigns.

Guthman’s most effective intervention in scholarship on obesity and the politics of fat is her nuanced critique of the alternative food movement. It is here that the author has thought through her own position as a Bay Area “foodie” with moderate economic privilege, a position that informs her personal stakes in this project. The chapter “Will Fresh, Local, Organic Food Make You Thin?”, for example, shows how the groups who seem most vocal in combating unequal food access and unhealthy diets are some of the most problematic actors in the “obesity epidemic.” Guthman charges the alternative food movement with unintentionally reinforcing forms of class and body privilege by seeking to change individual patterns of consumption and thus playing into neoliberalism by not advocating for structural transformation of the industrial food system.

The alternative food movement has in the main advocated a universal diet—“healthy, organic, local food”—in order to improve the health and body size of Americans; this normative aim, Guthman persuasively argues, reinforces the primacy of the neoliberal capitalist subject who is held accountable for making better choices. The focus within this movement on access to “good” food and on reform of U.S. farm policy neglects the wider political and economic systems that create structural inequities. That, ultimately, is where Guthman wants to take her reader—beyond the dubious science that has defined an American obesity epidemic and beyond the “foodie” discourse of access and choice, towards a critique of capitalism and its limits.

Guthman’s readers may well be the very scientists, academics, and activists whom she challenges, and they thus may respond with criticism of her thesis or her interpretation of epidemiological data. However, scholars and activists will be hard pressed from this point forward to take on the obesity epidemic without first engaging with Guthman’s sharp critique of its underlying assumptions and attendant policy recommendations. Weighing In offers a complete shift in perspective for readers in food studies, public health, nutrition science, and any field working to correct the problem of obesity. Weighing In is an outcome of impressive intellectual, emotional, and physical labor on the part of the author, work that lays a strong foundation for her radical reconceptualization of a social phenomena as complex and multifaceted as obesity.

—Stephanie Maroney, University of California, Davis

Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India
Jayeeeta Sharma

Assam, Northeast India’s largest state, is famous for its black, malty teas and infamous for its tumultuous subnational politics. Jayeeeta Sharma’s Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India tells the gripping story of how plants, people, languages, and ideologies have cross-pollinated to make Assam a socio-natural landscape of extraction and contestation.

Empire’s Garden is an ambitious history of the birth of the Indian tea industry, colonial labor migration, and Indian regional identity and class formation. Expanding on the foundational work of Richard Drayton and David Arnold, Sharma organizes Empire’s Garden around the concept of “improvement.” While the theme of improvement is familiar to scholars of colonial environmental history, Empire’s Garden offers readers much more than an environmental history. It is also much more than the history of a well-known beverage. In Sharma’s narrative, the concept of improvement steeps and unfurls, like tea itself. Sharma analyzes an impressive array of archival sources, particularly from Assamese print culture, to unpack the multiple ways in which actors framed improvement as they imagined and materialized a modern, Indian Assam. Improvement discourses informed colonial planters’ racial taxonomies of labor, scientists’ taxonomies of plants and landscapes, and, later, Assamese elites’ visions of economic mobility and national belonging.

In Part One, Sharma describes how imperial scientists and planters imagined Assam’s agricultural landscape as a garden, an Edenic space in need of transformation by colonial experts. The metaphor of the garden, like the discourse of improvement, appears across Sharma’s text, as actors of different classes and with sometimes divergent interests attempt to make Assam a space of production as well as reproduction.