Diet and the Disease of Civilization: American Myths of Embodied Utopia, 1977-2014

Drawing on interviews, archival research, and the close study of more than 500 published diet books, I have argued that diets draw from American traditions of perfectibility to create a new type of embodied utopia in response to changing discourses of civilization. My four chapters each address how different genres of diet advice have answered the question: What kind of ‘nature’ is the cure for civilization? How is civilization understood in terms of health and disease? How is human nature defined? To what historical end?

Chapters

Paleolithic Diets and the Weight Loss Utopia, 1977-2014

“Of course you are a human being! Everybody is. But did you know that you are also an animal – a carnivorous animal? All humans are.” Walter Voegtlin, The Stone Age Diet. 1975


The “Paradise Paradox”: Rethinking Diabetes and Obesity in the Pacific Islands

“The Pacific Islanders and their social, cultural, and economic patterns had remained untouched...In the space of a few years, the Pacific Islanders were parachuted into the 20th century.” Paul Zimmet, Diabetes Care. 1979.

“Bad diet is the greatest killer of Hawaiians today.” Terry Shintani, Hawaii Diet. 1999.

“I saw a sea of jubilant Native Hawaiian faces. They were pleased—if not jubilant—to once again be eating in place, eating with their ancestors, and eating what was fit for their genes and their cultural identity.” Gary Paul Nabhan, Food, Genes, and Cultural Diversity. 2004.

The Therapeutic Landscape: Class and the Regionalization of Health

“It is inspired by the great-tasting, sun-drenched foods that make California’s beautiful Sonoma County a paradise of healthy eating.” Connie Guttersen, The Sonoma Diet. 2005.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if you could move to one of the beautiful countries with a breathtaking diamond blue coastline along the Mediterranean Sea?” Denise Hazime, The Mediterranean Diet Cookbook. 2014.


Adrienne Rose Johnson is a PhD student in Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford University. Broadly, she studies concepts of modernity in American popular culture and her dissertation examines utopianism and the historical imagination in medical advice literature, particularly 20th century American diet book bestsellers.