

# Fad diets shape societal trends about health, scholar reveals

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Popular diets such as the paleo plan get a hard look by Stanford doctoral candidate Adrienne Rose Johnson in her dissertation analyzing contemporary diet literature.

From no-carb to juice cleanses, it's easy to dismiss diet trends as nothing more than passing fads.

But new research by Adrienne Rose Johnson, a doctoral candidate in Stanford's Modern Thought and Literature Program, shows just how significant diet literature is in revealing society's evolving ideas about health and disease.

Johnson's dissertation, titled "Diet and the Disease of Civilization, 1975-2008," is the first academic analysis of contemporary diet books. In it, she examines how diet books leverage various myths of human origins to associate health with the way our ancestors lived.

Although studies have examined the anti-feminist culture of dieting, Johnson's work is original in its focus on diet books as "political manifestos, or persuasive texts," not just weight-loss manuals. "This is uncharted territory," Johnson said.

Her research combines a medical history of "diseases of civilization" (that is, diseases associated with the modern age, including heart disease, obesity and diabetes) with a literary analysis of diet books and medical advice.

The diet books in Johnson's study focus on myths of the cave man, Adam and Eve, and pre-colonial and pre-industrial societies. She also delved into diet subcultures by interviewing obesity researchers and gurus at conventions like the Ancestral Health Society and a dude ranch weight-loss camp.

"Diet books are stories about where we come from, who we are now and where we should go," Johnson said. "They're whole worldviews about health, human history and the future of the species. You can't get bigger than that."

Johnson argues that a common thread in all of the diets she analyzes is an assumption that "the more modern we become, the sicker we become."

According to Johnson, this narrative distorts how we think of disease both in everyday life and, on a larger scale, in medicine and public policy. "We have to consider how to approach disease in the 21st century as not embedded in these myths of human progress," she said.

Johnson points out that the 21st-century diet du jour, the paleo plan, typifies the contemporary diet's attachment to the past by presenting the life of the cave man as the model of health.

"This is the argument that's been around since Darwin, that the cave man is our natural self, and to conduct ourselves in a godly or natural way, a way conducive to our biology, we have to revert to his way of life," she said.

## **Manuals for a better world**

Based on her interviews, Johnson noticed that people don't read diet books just to lose weight. Rather, she found that diet books are so popular because they provide a utopian vision of an improved society and serve as both "myths and manuals" for a better world.

She characterizes most diet books as "a hero's narrative," in which the protagonist starts out suffering, goes on a quest and then achieves happiness.

Johnson references passages from paleo diet books to illustrate the underlying narrative forms of these popular stories. For example, *The Paleolithic Prescription* (1988) describes an idealized Stone Age community as full of sweet honey, beautiful women and abundant feasts.

Their lives were full of "closeness and interdependence ... talking, arguing, laughing, playing."

Johnson argues that these passages, which have very little to do with weight loss and everything to do with the pursuit of a better life, are the backbone of the diet narrative.

"If you're studying literature, then you have to study what people read, and what people read are diet books," Johnson said. "Weight loss in America is a \$60 billion industry."

Johnson said she believes diet books are significant because they cause real change in everyday lives.

"They reflect what people believe, and these beliefs are not insignificant," she said. "They're screenplays by which we live our lives and actually influence the day-to-day decisions that many people live out."

Johnson chose which books to study based on their popularity and how they mapped onto social and political movements. Because academic libraries do not typically collect diet books, she searched out many on her own, through eBay, garage sales, thrift stores and friends.

One of Johnson's favorite finds is among the few diet book titles in the Stanford library collection: *Detox*, a 1984 volume written by a Stanford alumna, Merla Zellerbach. *Detox* describes a complicated diet that forbids cooking in anything other than stainless steel, glass, porcelain or cast iron.

Johnson appreciated the author's "spunk" in using a diet book to tackle her real agenda: a damning environmentalist critique of toxic industrial chemicals and soil pollution.

"Basically, she wedged a bizarre, impossible diet into a book to make her political and environmental views more palatable," Johnson said.

## Rethinking approaches to health

Johnson argues that perceived connections between disease and modernity not only influence individual dieters but also shape public conceptions of health. "On a higher level, they influence medical treatment, [public policy](#), economic policy and global aid," she said.

For example, Johnson examined some of the Pacific Islands as a case study of the connection between diseases of civilization and colonialism.

On the island of Nauru, 70 percent of the 10,000 inhabitants are now classified as obese and over a third are diabetic. "The rates of obesity, diabetes and [heart disease](#) just skyrocketed in the course of three decades," Johnson said.

Johnson found that most medical experts published in leading journals did not recommend modern treatments. Instead, they suggested returning to a pre-colonial lifestyle and diet as the best method to reduce the rates of disease.

"But even if Nauruans did want to recapture traditional ways, it would be impossible because phosphate mining wrecked the country's arable land," Johnson said.

Johnson said that she hopes that recognizing this association of disease with modernity can help us to rethink our approach to health.

"These older ways of thinking about human progress are not viable in a world in which disease is not located to any particular country," she said. "We have to look at global health as a truly global phenomenon."

Provided by Stanford University

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