

**Review of:**

***Diet and the Disease of Civilization***

**Adrienne Rose Bitar. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018. Pp. 234, notes, bibliography, index.**

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In *Diet and the Disease of Civilization* Adrienne Rose Bitar utilizes hundreds of diet books, pamphlets, and food diaries to examine the influence of mythic narratives on diet books in the United States. Using an interdisciplinary approach, she explores how folkloric motifs are shaped, engaged, and rehashed in diet lore. As a result, Bitar creates a compelling argument about the connections between diets and national identity.

Through close examination, Bitar's text analyzes diet lore from the inside out. She demonstrates how Americans are influenced by powerful folkloric ideas that affect the physical, emotional, and national body. Bitar writes that "these diets remember an original, innocent world and mourn the descent of the human race into modern disease" (6). The central argument of the text is that diet narratives reveal the way in which storytelling motifs coalesce and spread through American culture. While the diets presented are different, each one uncovers how our diet nation's cultural consciousness has been engineered by storytelling. Through cultural and narrative exploitation, in the United States the term "diet" has become an unabashed four-letter word.

The book is organized in four compelling chapters. In Chapter One, "Paleolithic Diets and the Caveman Utopia," Bitar shows how these diets pull towards myths and stories that stimulate ideas about how food and culture can be much improved by utilizing a basic or simpler approach to eating. The author explains that the "Paleo [diet] myth redefines a new type [of diet] of refined, slow pleasure," with a "peaceful vision of gender relations" that "overturns scholarly thinking about brutish caveman masculinity" (6). While the stories about these diets venerate "pre-agricultural diets" they give minimal practical advice about the supposedly basic fare.

In Chapter Two, "Devotional Diets and the American Eden," Bitar says that "Fall of Man and Fall of a Once-Blessed Nation" are melded into one narrative that shames Americans into changing "their way of life and improve the health of a nation" (52). She likens them to "the tradition of the jeremiad" in how the diets "their way of life and improve the health of a nation" (52). The chapter focuses on how suffering and self-denial are primary themes of diets such as "Pray Your Weigh Away" and "Garden of Eating" varieties, and finds that the type equates the pleasure of eating with lust and fattening foods with defilement. Nevertheless, Bitar points out how "imaginative and complex" the faith-based diets are, commonly describing the "aesthetics of food," and encouraging adoptees "to imagine a material vision of the Garden of Eden" (73).

In Chapter Three, “Primitive Diets and the ‘Paradise Paradox,’” Bitar investigates the significance of nineteenth century literary theories on the health and diets of Pacific Islanders. She shows how colonial narratives both eroticize and blame Natives for their poor diets, specifically targeting the Shintani diet. Particularly popular in Hawai’i, the diet was developed for obese and diabetic patients. In order to engage dieters—mostly local people—the narrative of the diet drew from traditional folkloric stories that reflect thematic moments in colonial literature. Bitar finds that the narrative erases diversity and “localizes people to a fixed place,” and broadly “constructs the Islands as a paradise, peopled by indulgent innocents, isolated from the larger world and the advances of time” (94). I appreciated Bitar’s close reading of these particular diet narratives as they do “ignore the serious issues of sovereignty, race, and inequality because they are dreams, myths, the hopeful stuff of stories” (95).

The final chapter, “Detoxification Diets and Concepts of a Toxic Modernity,” was quite enlightening as detoxification through numerous means is incredibly popular in contemporary American culture. Bitar argues that these diets are “utopian and optimistic, offering hope for a better body and a better world.” In the “discourses of toxic” she explains how “many Americans have dreamt of health and purity in a world too often seen as sick and ugly and sad” (148). In today’s political reality, this “wistful vision” might make Americans yearn that, if only this diet lore were true, then perhaps we could detoxify the current US administration by putting politicians on juice fasts to cleanse the meanness out of them.

While *Diet and the Disease of Civilization* overall is an enjoyable and informative read, I did find the book’s invocation of the Slow Food Movement and Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* too easily and incompletely associated with diet lore and the narrative of the Edenic: I would like to have seen fuller consideration of Slow Food’s and Pollan’s groundedness in social, food, and animal justice. Ultimately, however, I found Bitar’s arguments on diet lore in the United States artful and captivating, and they provide important lessons for the reader.