Collecting the Commonplace:  
The Promises of American Diet Literature

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At a Goodwill in Sacramento, two pale blue index cards fell out of a dog-eared 2007 diet book. In a loose cursive handwriting, the writer listed thirteen advantages to losing weight, beginning with “freedom of movement” and ending with “food won’t over shadow (sic) my thoughts or my life.” She also listed “being feminine again + pretty, better health, less pain,” and, most poignantly, “feeling worthy” and the chance to “renounce shame of my body.” For her, at least, this diet book held the hope of “adventure—sports—exploring,” “living life,” and the renunciation of shame. For me, as well, these cards hold the hope of analyzing the enormous pain and power that diet books can offer their readers.

Much later, I Scotch-taped these index cards in my dissertation carrel. Whenever I tire of the endless research involved in writing a dissertation on an understudied, overlooked, and often-mocked popular culture topic, I glance up at these cards. They remind me, with the eloquence of brevity, of the profundity of diet books usually only granted to high literature – Dickens, Shakespeare, Hemingway and other literature that transforms readers and transports them into a more meaningful world. Stripped of plot, narrative, and figurative language, diet books lay bare the essential promise of all literature – the restorative, transformative powers of reading. Diet authors guarantee that by virtue of reading their books and meticulously following their programs, the reader will transform and shed the sorrows and worries that their weight has come to symbolize.

American diet literature is a difficult genre to categorize: it ranges from the
quackery of *Breatharianism* (on the miracles of nutritional air) to the hard science of *The Ketogenic Diet*. When I first proposed this dissertation to my committee, my professors challenged me to refine my methods of selection. Diet books, like romance novels or pulp fiction, are a capacious category that includes cookbooks, exercise manuals, calorie counters, and other ephemeral printed material. The category consists of books that most libraries might hesitate to include in a scholarly collection -- my initial search in the Stanford libraries turned up some valuable historical sources such as Lulu Hunt Peters’ 1918 *Diet and Health* but, for good reason, didn't include mass market paperbacks such as *The Beverly Hills Diet* or *The Juice Lady's Weekend Weight-Loss Diet* that compose the bulk of diet bestsellers.

I knew then that whatever collection I consulted would be one of my own creation. Though I could fairly easily define my method of selection based on bestseller lists from *Publisher's Weekly* and *New York Times*, I knew that I needed an inclusive method to create a balanced, representative archive. I wanted to resist the impulse found in popular culture studies to analyze simply the objects of mass consumption and neglect their intimate role in the lives of everyday Americans. I wanted to recognize these books as more than just words on a page, pictures on a screen, or vehicles for the transmission of text. I wanted to see how readers used these books -- how they read them, collected them, dog-eared, thumbed, and annotated them.

I found this information by buying the most timeworn copies of the 37 bestselling diet books in 20th century America in thrift store "health" sections and eBay. I also read WorldCat’s nearly 11,000 entries under “reducing diets” to categorize subgenres and buy the most widely circulated titles (held in over 500 libraries). The most meaningful
acquisition, however, came from a Craigslist advertisement I placed. I acquired nearly 80 volumes that spanned over five decades and chronicled an entire lifetime of hurt, grief, and hope.

A woman named Tammy responded to my Craigslist advertisement and, for $80, sold me five old boxes of musty, water-stained, oil-splattered diet books originally owned by Kathy Cave, a Sonoma County woman. After cleaning each book with Clorox, these books, pamphlets, ephemera, and laid in loose materials came to constitute a hugely valuable dissertation resource. The texts themselves ranged from the mainstream (*The South Beach Diet, Dr. Atkin's Diet Revolution*) to the local (Cave collected six titles authored by John and Mary McDougall, a Sonoma County couple) to an exquisitely personal diet diary. Cave dated many of her books upon receipt and her handwritten notes provide invaluable clues to the role these books played in her life. She noted that her son "hated" Suzanne Somers' *Get Skinny on Fabulous Food* recipes. She underlined sentences in *Free of Dieting Forever* and used exclamation marks to punctuate her hope that this might be her last diet book. And she continued to collect books for another twenty years after she bought *Free of Dieting Forever* for $4.99 in 1990.

Cave also owned ephemera -- the leaflets, newspaper clippings, recipe cards, and other transitory scraps of the written word that more often end up in the recycling bin than they do in scholarly archives. Cave's 1965 portable carbohydrate gram counter was yellowed, foxed, and clearly meant to accompany the dieter to the grocery store or the steak house rather than be saved for fifty years for academic analysis. Her clipping of the *Sonoma Valley Sun* profile of the McDougall couple's weight loss success was carefully
folded into their book promising "dynamic health" in just twelve days. A recipe card from Safeway for fried tilapia bookmarked Atkin's chapter on artificial sweeteners.

The scraps and ephemera folded into the books were a necessary complement to the text the books contained; they illustrated the living processes of reader response. Some feminist criticism and popular cultural studies assume the reader-as-dupe ready to accept the meaning thrust upon her by the text. Though my graduate training in literature has taught me to imagine the communication between book and reader, Cave’s ephemera and annotations enlivened the crackle and spark of the electric lines of communication by which the books speaks to the reader and, in response, the reader speaks back. And this written evidence demonstrates that, for Cave and dozens of others who owned my books before, readers don’t simply swallow the text whole but engage in a process of reading that accepts parts of the text’s claims and rejects others.

Yet the fine line between scholar and snoop blurred when a "before" photograph of Cave in a billowy sun dress fell out of her copy of the 1998 Fat to Firm at Any Age. This snapshot stunned me. For all of my high rhetoric about the importance of examining popular literature not as isolated artifacts but through the readers who give literature meaning, nothing could have prepared me for the picture of this smiling blonde woman. Cave was not obese or pitiful or haggard like her diet books might have suggested -- she was an average-sized woman who, for some reason, captioned her portrait, "BEFORE" in thick black letters. And this one word, written in the muted text of Cave’s distinct hand, summarized much of the pain and promise of diet literature – the pain of frustration, of shame, inadequacy and hurt and, also, at the same time, that peculiarly American trope of the transformative powers of hope. Cave must have hated
her body when she fed it gallons of cabbage soup, complained of stomach pains in the margins of *Dr. Atkin’s New Diet Revolution*, yet she fed it also on the hope that she might, one day, become the woman she envisioned as AFTER.

And it is Cave, the nameless author of the pale blue index cards, and the countless other readers who have left their mark in my collection who give it all meaning. They demonstrated value of whole collections of books and other printed matter that represent the seemingly banal aspects of everyday reader’s lives. They also demonstrated that these books were objects in dialogue – interactive objects to be consulted, dog-eared, written in, cooked with, carried around, cried over.

Though diet literature often admonishes readers by directing them on what to eat for breakfast (a six egg scramble, vinegar and lemon juice, nothing at all), how to hold your body (twirling a pencil, taking the stairs, hugging), even who to love (obese friends are a no-no), this collection illustrates the dialogue of book and reader. In the margins and on the blank flyleafs, readers amended recipes, scolded themselves, and, charted out their measurement and weights. It took Cave’s BEFORE picture, the author of the blue index card’s promise to herself to “renounce shame of my body,” and the many other readers who left their mark in my collection to teach me that, for true emotive understanding, I needed to approach these books more as object witnesses to the daily struggles of countless women than for the text they contain or the ideas they abstract. I needed to see the living relationship between book and reader to understand that these books – these mocked, formulaic, and often misogynistic books – might never realize an “AFTER,” but they are always a stunningly crystallized promise of something beyond “BEFORE.”
Selected Bibliography

Regional diet books, titles determined by distinction of content and breadth of circulation


A gift from my father, this fair condition paperback riffs on so many of the conventions of standard diet books. With a forward from diet experts “Chuck Roast” and “Ophelia Belly” and dedicated to “Sara Lee” and “Little Debbie,” Bailey includes high calorie recipes for fast weight gain. The irony of this diet reveals much that is ridiculous about its serious counterparts: the extravagant guarantees, the enthusiastic anecdotes, the nutritional quackery. On Bailey’s “fat-track” program, the dieter can realize his dream “to be ogled admiringly by people as you sashay down the beach with a giant-size bag of Nutter Butters in one hand, and a large Frosty in the other?” My father bought it for $4.00 from Sweet Briar Books in Davis, California in 2010.


First published in 2004, Guiliano’s book is a treatise on the joys of eating, the right of women to cultivate pleasure in their diet, and, ironically, a diet that prescribes a strict regimen of “magical leek soup.” One of the few diets also held in Stanford’s library, this book widespread appeal speaks to older American veneration of European sophistication and inspired a run of spinoff books such as Moriyama’s *Japanese Women Don’t Get Old or Fat* and Blum’s *Cave Women Don’t Get Fat*.


In good condition with some sunning, I purchased this copy at the Berkeley Friends of the Library Bookstore for $7.00 in 2007. This was my first book in my collection and I consulted it as a primary source for my 2008 American Studies thesis at UC Berkeley. I used Moriyama’s text to supplement interviews with Asian and Asian-American women competitive eaters (or gurgitators) to suggest that the myth of Asian invulnerability to obesity corresponded across sources. My interview with Sonya “the Black Widow” Thomas bore astonishing resemblance to many of Moriyama’s claims.

A riff on the runaway bestseller *French Women Don’t Get Fat,* Moriyama uses the magical land “where forty-year-old women look like they are twenty” of Japan and low obesity rates (one-third that of France) to promote her diet. Like Shintani, Moriyama’s story of region is actually one of modernization and progress: she argues for the naturalness and health of the ancient traditions of Japan.

In fair condition and purchased from Goodwill in Menlo Park for $3.29, Shintani’s diet program marked a turning point in my consideration of regional diet books. Shintani’s praise of the “natural health” of ancient times and his denunciation of the corruption and artificiality of the modern diet first alerted me to the idea that what was ostensibly about place, is actually concerned with time. Hawaii, in this example, is positioned as a land of paradiisiacal natural beauty in which native Hawaiians luxuriated in their trim figures, intimate relation to the landscape, and the “Almighty Father or Great Physician” which bestowed His world with healing power. Hawaii is much less of a place than it is a period: a mythical time before modernity, a prelapsarian paradise of innocence. *HawaiiDiet* simply lays bare what simmers under many other books: that diet is at once an eloquent critique of modernity and also, tragically, a powerful emblem of modernity’s success.

**Bestsellers from *Publisher’s Weekly* and *New York Times*, acquired from thrift stores, garage sales, eBay, my mother’s bookshelves, and Amazon.com.**


In fair condition, this paperback is one of the most emblematic diet books of the 20th century. Publishers and scholars estimate that the book sold between 12 and 15 million copies since its initial publication in 1972 and is one of the bestselling nonfiction books in 20th century America. My mother purchased this book after reading Atkin’s first diet book in the late 1980s and her experience is inevitably colored by my own memory of her subscription to the Atkins diet. Though the book is unmarked by annotation or marginalia, it is indelibly marked by my memory of my mother refusing to eat the potatoes or salad she had prepared for dinner, memories of her picking at her restaurant meals, memories of the family outings for ice cream which she gave up as soon as she picked up her copy of Atkins’ *Diet Revolution*. These memories supplement an otherwise barren text and remind me that, for every reader and dieter, there are many more influenced by her choices. Diets are not simply private programs read in solitude but restrictive eating plans that linger on in the memories of friends, children, husbands, and wives.


In good condition, this book is the only crossover title between both my bestseller and regional lists. Still held in 808 public and university libraries in the United States, Mazel’s book explicitly touts the natural health of wealthy Beverly Hills, Ca. Mazel, more than most diet authors, promises an unbelievable fantasy life. She writes, "You can have both -- hamburgers and hipbones, cheesecake and cheekbones -- all the foods you love and the body you’ve always dreamed of." I purchased this book from eBay for $1.99 in November 2012.

The oldest book in my collection, this copy of the bestseller is sunned, foxed, and its corners are bumped and frayed. For all its wear, however, the copy is in remarkably good condition for its age.

Dr. Peters’ book is broadly considered the first runaway diet bestseller in the United States and the title reportedly sold over two million copies in its 55 subsequent editions issued from 1918 to 1939. Easy-to-read and with a approachable, vivacious tone, Dr. Peters is also credited with introducing the term “calorie” into American parlance (she instructs readers on the term’s pronunciation: “Kal’-o-ri) and used her young nephew’s stick figures to illustrate the text. Dr. Peters is likable, funny, and I caught myself laughing in the library at some of her offhand remarks about Mrs. Weyaton and Mrs. Sheesasite’s battles with the bulge.

**From the Cave acquisition**


Cave enfolded a 2006 receipt at Raley’s grocery store for $75.18 between the front cover and the title page of this good condition guide. The contents of her shopping cart suggest that Cave consulted Agatston’s guide as she shopped for pickles, cabbage, ground beef, and pepper jack cheese. This utilitarian guide lists portion suggestion, total carbs, sugars, and fats of thousands of common foods and either recommends whether or not the dieter should avoid or consume (and in what quantity) the listed foods. The title page is yellowed and shaded with the imprint of the folded receipt, suggesting that Cave may have only used Agatston’s guide a few times.


In fine condition, the cookbook is lavishly illustrated on glossy art paper. The dust jacket is slightly rubbed but the book is in otherwise pristine condition. Organized by phase of diet and meal course, recipes include many ingredients on Cave’s 2006 grocery store receipt. For example, Cave’s receipt could suggest she was cooking “South Beach Tomato Sauce” in phase 1 or “Pepper-Spiked Beef Stew.”


The simple and bold design of the cover art on this fair condition copy of the Agatston’s bestseller suggests the diet’s source of authority lies more in Agatston’s medical reputation and the runaway success of the diet than it does in the South Beach region. Though cross-listed with my regional diet books, this title’s use of South Beach seems more incidental than integral to its diet claims. As the cornerstone to Cave’s three-part collection of Agatston’s diet material, this book is clearly well-read and is slightly soiled by, presumably, its consultation as Cave cooked according to recipes in the detailed meal plans.

One of the bestselling and widely circulated of the regional diet books, Cave’s paperback copy of *The Mediterranean Diet* is also significant in the cover art’s abstraction of the elements of the artistic pastoral. Framed against rolling green hills and a collection of white villas, a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread are set under grapevines. In *The Mediterranean Diet*’s many other editions, the elements are more apparent: the 2001 edition uses a photograph of rolling vineyards and my 1994 cookbook supplement exhibits more still-life artistic elements in its plump fruit overflowing from a cornucopian fruit bowl. The subsequent editions of this title (and its spinoff material) show how the artistic elements of the pastoral mature and simplify into a type of code in which a single element is assumed to signify far greater meaning. The muted yellows of the abstract land refer back to the older still art encapsulation of the art historical meaning of the pastoral as a genre.


This good condition 31-page pamphlet with saddle stitch binding illustrates the shaky middle ground between ephemera and books in the spectrum of printed material. Even after showing this pamphlet to a hospital staff member, research librarian, and a publisher’s assistant, its origins are still murky. Though it may have been distributed as complimentary reading material at a hospital or doctor’s office, Cave may also have acquired it as a free supplement to another book or guide. Given the predominating theme of reducing diets of her collection, I am hazarding that this pamphlet was distributed at a medical center that Cave attended. The discrepancy of this guide (that emphasizes diet for heart health, rather than weight reduction) within her weight-loss collection demonstrates the wide range of materials that an individual collects. Without scholarly criteria, Cave exhibited some idiosyncratic standards in determining her collection that, I believe, better represents the breadth of reader’s actual interests.


Poor condition with a chipped spine and yellowed pages, Mills’ book is a classic example of the “anti-diet diet book” category that I have created to classify narratives that situate themselves in direct opposition to dieting. Opening with the sentences, “I’m fat. I’m ugly” and dedicated to the “intolerable suffering” endured by frustrated dieters, Mills sympathizes with the pain of her readers and promises that the loss of “negative thoughts and anxious feelings” will result in weight loss to, ironically, pitch her own diet. This yellowed, brittle
paperback is also a good example of undistinguished diet books with limited circulation that would never have come to my attention had it not been in an acquisition.

Folded into the chapter “My Fat Story,” I found a Christian pamphlet titled “Life in a Peaceful New World” (Figure 1). Though unrelated in content to Free of Dieting Forever, the pamphlet shares similar promises of miraculous transformation and pastoral paradises in the world of “AFTER.”


Comb bound in blue plastic and mainly blank, this diet diary is designed as a supplement to the corresponding diet plan. Though Cave either never owned the plan or it was lost in the transfer of her collection, the diary uses a grid format for readers to fill in the details of their breakfasts, lunches, dinners, snacks, and exercise. Time of day, content of the food, and calories are all recorded alongside inspirational quotes and exercise hints. Cave only filled in two days of her diet and exercise plan but the incompleteness of the diary might speak more than a finished diary. Her careful record of her half-grapefruit breakfast and 25 minutes of brisk exercise drops off after only two days and demonstrates both the promise of diet and suggests the frustration and pain attendant to the rigorous plan.


This saddle-stitched pamphlet is one of the many pieces Cave owned of printed material from the editors of Prevention. In poor condition and stained with what (I fear) was rat droppings, this pamphlet is little more than a black-and-white Xerox that exhorts readers to raise metabolic rate through muscle toning and mental calisthenics. The back cover art is unusual for its incongruity with weight loss goals: most diet books use pastoral images of food, crops, or thin models but this pamphlet is illustrated with a backdrop of luscious red roses.


More than any other title from the Cave collection, this book has the most ephemera laid into its pages. In good condition, Cave used slips of notebook paper (all blank save one “to-do” list) and paper towels as bookmarks. She also laid in a Lucky grocery store receipt from 1999 that lists her purchases. As she later did in the 2006 Raley’s receipt laid into the South Beach diet food guide, this items on the receipt suggest that Cave shopped with the diet book in mind or literally in her cart as she chose diet-friendly groceries. Cave’s inclusion of a celebrity-authored diet book is a key element as many diet books (especially in the 1980s and 1990s) were promoted by celebrities with a reputation for fitness. This book’s photographs constantly emphasize Somers role as a sex symbol; pictures of her luxuriating in a bathtub full of roses or sipping tea in bed,
wearing beautiful white pajamas have, ostensibly, little to do with the diet itself but instead speak to the larger dreams of beauty, health, and wealth the diets encapsulate.

Secondary sources


A foundational book in feminist critique and analysis of Western fascination with the woman’s body, Bordo’s scholarship is at once intellectually stimulating and deeply moving. Though, like the Schwartz book, I had read the text before from the Berkeley library, this particular copy was acquired from the “free” pile outside Stanford’s English department and the price sticker suggests it was purchased from Borders bookstore for $18.00. The “free” pile is composed of books discarded by English faculty and I was surprised by the selections this professor (presumably) underlined in the text. Comments from Foucault, erotic politics, and gender symbolism have been annotated with cursory checkmarks, other passages are entirely bare of marginalia, but, surprisingly, the most underlined sentences are in a chapter titled “hunger as ideology.” Insatiable desire and the social control of female hunger resonated with this reader and her selections taught me that the emotional and very intimate world of weight loss extends beyond the readers of popular diet books and into the lives of many more women – even academics. Her selections in this book speak to my own, much larger selection of my dissertation topic that, for personal reasons that many women collectively share, resonate with me both in the intimate world of feeling and the intellectual world of ideas.


The first secondary source in my collection, Schwartz’s incisive survey of dieting culture is necessary for any comprehensive study of weight loss literature. I purchased this fine condition paperback in 2007 for $1 at Roseville’s Friends of the Library sale. Though I had read the text from the UC Berkeley library before, the gift inscription to this copy was particularly moving. “For Stephanie – who will hopefully learn, one day, to be satisfied with her wonderful, beautiful self whom I love. Always, Julia,” was dated on May 24, 1990. The inscription gave emotional profundity to a text that detailed the struggles of so many Americans (mainly women) with their bodies and the anxieties that their weight had come to symbolize. As I have returned to this book many times over my undergraduate and graduate coursework, I often wonder if Stephanie ever learned to be satisfied with herself.

Miscellaneous

Author unknown. “Advantages of giving extra weight Back to the universe.” Notecards. Print. (Figure 2).
These notecards illustrated in unambiguous terms what weight loss meant to one diet book reader. Though her personal details are completely unknown, this reader makes clear that, from “feeling worthy” to “my cravings will diminish,” her goals for weight loss extend much farther than the mere dissipation of pounds. While I could interpret her goals within the larger political, feminist scholarship of body image, oppression, or reader response, I would rather let her hopes dwell in the possibilities they promise. I prefer to let her words speak for themselves: I believe my role, as a scholar, is to draw out the word’s meanings while deferring to her authority. And, for that reason, the full text follows:

“1) Freedom of movement 2) Better chance of good health now & in future 3) Being feminine again + pretty 4) Adventures – sports – hiking – exploring 5) feeling worthy 6) renounce shame of my body 7) Less pain 8) Living Life 9) My cravings will diminish 10) I wont struggle over whether or not to eat something 11) I feel good when I resist unplanned eating 12) I wont feel guilty or demoralized if I give in to a craving 13) Food won’t over shadow (sic) my thoughts or my life.”