

Explorations in Mental Health

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY DIET CULTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

EATING THE LACK

Bethany Morris



“What you put in your mouth, how you put it in your mouth, and indeed what you do not put in your mouth, informs us of the individual’s struggle to situate him or herself within a particular social and cultural context. Bethany Morris’ book offers readers a truly unique vantage point into American dieting behaviours from a Lacanian perspective. The Lacanian perspective is absolutely essential for understanding contemporary American diet culture today. This is a valuable resource and will leave all readers with more than enough to chew on.”

Duane Rousselle, *Assistant Professor, Department of
Sociology, Nipissing University, Canada*



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Understanding Contemporary Diet Culture through the Lens of Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory

This book offers a close analysis of the relationship between diets and identity in modern Western culture through the examination of popular texts including blogs, diet books, and websites.

The relationship between consumerism and identity has been explored by scholars for decades now, but less has been said about how food and eating behaviors have been wrapped up in this relationship. Using Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, chapters investigate how diets and eating are used as a means to navigate individuals' complex, unconscious desires and conflicts, and illustrate how diet and advertising industries use this to capitalize on the anxieties of the modern subject. The text's psychoanalytic approach offers rare insight into the unconscious desires that dictate individuals' choices around diets and lifestyle. By situating anxiety as the tension between *jouissance* and desire, the book promotes further understanding of individuals' subjective and complex relationships with food.

Through an understanding of the subject and symptoms from a psychoanalytic perspective, we can begin to think differently about the ways we come to eating and dieting. This book will be useful for scholars and postgraduate students studying Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, consumer psychology, mental health, the sociology of culture, and social and cultural anthropology.

Bethany Morris is a professor at Point Park University in Pittsburgh, PA, USA.

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**For Alexander,
for giving the nourishment that sustains me**



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About the Author

Bethany Morris is a professor at Point Park University in Pittsburgh, PA, USA. She has her PhD in Psychology from the University of West Georgia. She has one previous single-authored book, *Sexual Difference, Abjection and Liminal Spaces: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Abhorrence of the Feminine*, and one co-authored book *Subjectivity in Psychology in the Era of Social Justice*. She currently lives in Pittsburgh with her husband Alexander, daughter, Audrey Ruth, and her dog, Dora.

Acknowledgments

While I was writing this book, my family dinner table changed substantially. My father, a man with a large appetite for life, passed away and my daughter, Audrey, who seems to be following after her grandfather, was born. As I watched my father eat less and less, and now watch my daughter get excited for every spoonful of food, I feel deeply indebted to those who took time and care to nourish me because I see now how fundamental the practice is for flourishing and thriving. Thank you to my mother, who insisted on family dinners throughout my childhood because that taught me how to come together as a family and take solace in the special thing we had. Thank you to my dear friends who have fed me over the years, Kaley, Annie, Chase and Jen, and Sebastienne. Your meals always came at an important moment when only your particular care and consideration would do. And thank you to my husband, Alexander, who is the inspiration for this book. You taught me what it means to be nourished and how deeply gratifying it is to nourish another.



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1 Eating the Lack

Human beings seem to have a distinctly unique problem in that they do not know how or what they should be feeding themselves. When we learn about other animals, we typically first learn about their diets and how those diets seem to correspond to the climate the animal thrives in or the composition of their body. You would be hard pressed to find a squirrel concerned about gluten or a bear worried about calorie content. Despite the many advantages that society has seemed to provide its human inhabitants, it has also deeply disturbed any sort of natural relationship with food. For example, many wonder if we are even actually eating food anymore, with so many foods becoming more and more processed. Books like Michael Pollen's *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* or diets like Paleo or Whole Foods promise that they can provide the consumer-subject with the necessary tools to return to eating "real food." Similarly, many people have also become concerned about how and from where our food is sourced, leading to a number of trends including eating local and fair-trade certified foods. This is not to say that such approaches are not useful for both the person or global commerce, but rather to point out that navigating how to appropriately feed oneself entails a number of considerations.

While our relationship to food has grown increasingly complicated, there seems to be a never-ending parade of solutions offered for every and all consumers. Every year, new research is conducted on the optimal diet, foods that cause and prevent diseases, how to lose/gain weight, relationships between food and mental health, and so on, and then followed by new diets hitting the market, each claiming that they will address those aforementioned concerns, all while taking into consideration climate change, exploitation of resources, carbon footprints, and so on. It is typically assumed that dieting is used as a means to lose weight. From 2013–2016, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) (2018) reported that approximately 49% of adults have tried to diet in order to lose weight. While the majority of these adults were women (56%), 47% of men also reported having dieted. Interestingly, income was reported as a factor as well, with higher income adults being reported as more likely to have dieted. The CDC also reported that explicit calorie restriction was more common (62.9%) than changing the quality of

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foods to include more fruits, vegetables, and salads (50.4%). Given that close to half of the American population seems to be diet-curious, with very little gender discrepancy, the diet industry only has room to grow. This is perhaps why every year there are new diets on the market, with sites like *USNews* providing a guided ranking each year.

And many of them, of course, work. The internet is full of testimonies and before and after pictures from people who have tried Atkins, Paleo, The Mediterranean Diet, Macros, and so on, and lost weight or changed their relationship to eating. This is not a book condemning dieting. In fact, I think in many cases, it provides a necessary buffer between the person and the crippling anxiety that is the *jouissance* of the Other, but more on that later. However, what proliferates throughout the blogs and testimonies is the assumption that because the diet worked for one person it will work for another. Frequently diets are marketed as being “common sense” or so easy anyone can figure it out. For example, in his chapter on pragmatism and the Atkins diet, Auxier (2005) states,

Dr. Atkins supplements our choice by pointing out that you can have much of what you want in answer to those very foreseeable crises, a steak for the black eye of desire. Make a few good choices about how to gratify your desires, according to a few time-proven, long-term principles, get into the habit of making those choices, and the short-term crisis of desire can be weathered.

(p. 6)

This notion of “habit” can be found anywhere there is a discussion of dieting or eating. Central to most of the dieting approaches is the assumption that one needs to “get into the habit” or find ways to make the correct food choices a habit. Very rarely is the notion of habit elaborated on and instead assumed to be something as simple as a repetitive behavior. There are discussions about how to develop or break a habit, as well as a general timeline for doing so – many know well the assertion that the average person needs three weeks to develop or break a habit. The CDC provides a list of tips to make healthy eating a habit, many of which are recited, dare I say regurgitated, on blogs and in books dedicated to specific diets. Many of these tips rely on the individual knowing and challenging their eating triggers. Such triggers include their emotional states that trigger problematic eating, whether it be the amount or type of food; having “bad” food in the house that the person finds difficult to refuse; skipping meals; and failing to adequately prep and prepare healthy meals and resorting to meals of convenience.

Many of the tips and tricks assume a cognitive-behavioral approach to changing habits to change one’s lifestyle. For those unfamiliar with a cognitive-behavioral psychology or therapy, the fundamental assumption is that one can change one’s behavior by changing one’s thoughts about

the behavior and vice versa. One's emotional states, motivations, and values are readily available for evaluation and can be supplanted with ones more suitable to the functioning of the person. Some approaches to changing diet habits go straight to behavioral training, skipping thought adjustment, with tips such as rewarding oneself after reaching a weight loss goal or prepping one's meals for the week to avoid any thinking about what one will eat. What is striking, and understandably frustrating, about such tips and tricks is that not only are they seemingly common sense, but they also do not seem to get to the heart of the problem. That is, why do people who practice these behaviors still struggle to achieve their diet goals? Why are these simple adjustments in behavior so difficult to maintain? It is my assertion that I hope to demonstrate throughout this book that it is because they assume the human subject is the subject of cogito – the thinking subject. The subject of cogito is the subject who is known to herself and who is not constituted by an unconscious. However, the difficulty evident in getting the subject to deploy and maintain these common-sense behavioral modifications demonstrates that there is a gap between knowledge addressed to the subject of cogito and the actual subject. The problem with knowledge-as-cure will be addressed further in the section on the psychoanalytic theory, but for my purposes now, it is sufficient to say that this gap allows for a proliferation of plugs to be manufactured, and none is quite sufficient.

The Social and Social Media

The widespread influence of the diet industry may make it seem like our relationship to food and dieting is distinctly a phenomenon under capitalism; anthropologists and sociologists have long demonstrated that a culture's relationship to food is rather abstract and akin to the study of language. For example, Lévi-Strauss (1969) suggested that a culture's relationship to raw, rotten, and cooked food, what he referred to as the culinary triangle, represents a semantic field through which to understand the structure of the culture. In his conceptualization of the culinary triangle, he explains how cooking removes meat from its natural form and, therefore, is an instantiation of culture. Methods of cooking are then on a spectrum of nearer and farther to the fire, with different traditions for all. For example, he explains how boiling meat usually means that less of the meat is readily available and is usually done by women to serve the family, where roasting would be done by the men for the larger community. Such a trend can still be seen in the stereotype that women cook (in the kitchen, with utensils) and men grill (outside, nearer to the flame, and for more people, such as with a cookout).

Anthropologist Mary Douglas also understood that food was more than what appeared on the plate. Her research focused largely on ritual and symbols, of which food was frequent a part. She claimed that food is “an