Chloe Archambault

Professor Sze

AMS 010

5 December 2017

Reduced Guilt: A Look at Morality, Femininity, and Food

When I was five years old, my mom swapped out the box of traditional Wheat Thins in our cupboard for the "Reduced Guilt" rendition. I didn't think much of it at the time, except for the fact that my favorite snack tasted a little more like cardboard than usual. My still-developing mind didn't realize it was being programmed from a young age to associate food with guilt, and for the most part, I ignored the labels boasting a lack of carbs, fat or calories that cycled through my household. However, later into my youth I realized I had not only inherited my mother's eyes, but also her predisposition for the adolescent onset of *anorexia nervosa.* Suddenly, my accumulated knowledge of pseudoscientific nutrition went from being a passive object in my life to an active force. When I was fifteen I found myself, all 65 inches and 90 pounds of me, sitting in the office of a psychologist who told me to *call her Sarah.* I told her about my mother, the "Reduced Guilt" Wheat Thins and my crippling fear of calories, and I'll never forget what she told me. *It's normal for teenage girls to have eating disorders; every girl hates her body.* This is something that has stuck with me to this day – an idea that I've seen perpetuated relentlessly by the toxic set of ideologies that make up diet culture. The idea that eating disorders, and troubled relationships with food are a natural, inevitable part of a woman's life is so ingrained in our culture that it might have appeared out of thin air. However, there is actually a much more devious, calculating system that promulgates the feminization of disordered eating; operating under the guise of a simple cultural fad. I believe that this system thrives by taking advantage of

women who are susceptible to disordered eating behavior, in an ultimate effort to monopolize on societal insecurities through a strategic marketing of diet products.

For the months that I continued to see Call Me Sarah, the only thing she ever did was reinforce my destructive behavior and intrusive thoughts by bringing up the proverbial diet products that had become such an integral aspect of my life. *Maybe if you didn't eat carbs you wouldn't feel so bad! Have you heard of this new protein powder? It's only 100 calories a serving, and uses sucralose as a substitute for sugar!* Hearing these things from a medical professional was indeed damaging to my fragile psyche, but in retrospect I can now see that Call Me Sarah and her psychological malpractice was simply a by-product of diet culture. Diet culture, as defined by The Gloss, is "a system of thought in which food is an issue of public morality, where eating whatever you want is a grave sin and abstaining from “bad” food – which could be fatty food, sweet food, or starchy food, depending on the month – is seen as virtuous" (McCarthy). The implicit feminization of this culture is what raised me, and what raised millions of other women. I'm not implying that eating disorders are an explicitly female disease, but rather that diet culture has decided and maintained the idea that females are inherently eating-disordered.

Having had the opportunity to interact with others who grew up immersed in diet culture, I've often been confronted with the common misconception that eating disorders are normal, and aren't in fact a result of an underlying psychological issue. Call Me Sarah's words constantly echo throughout these conversations – *it's normal for teenage girls to have eating disorders; every girl hates her body.* I began to wonder how we, as a society, have managed to conventionalize such a severe mental disorder through something as minor as a "Reduced Guilt" label. Paul Robbins explores this phenomenon on a wider scale in his article "Explaining Lawn

People," and offers an explanation as to why this rampant systemization might be such a prevalent issue. Robbins introduces the idea of *hegemony,* which is defined in the article as the "power to turn enforcement into something that appears to happen 'spontaneously'" (8). According to this concept, it's simple to disregard the political and socioeconomic influences that continue to hegemonize eating disorders in favor of an explanation that not only lacks credibility, but also blame. If the implicit feminization of eating disorders is passed off as something that *just is,* then there doesn't need to be an allocation of guilt to anyone for perpetuating it. It might be the "Reduced Guilt" version of traditional marketing, but even the implication behind the tagline has a set of serious, contemptible implications.

The phrase "reduced guilt" seems innocent enough, but not only does it imply that certain foods *should* evoke feelings of guilt, it's tailored specifically to take advantage of those who are familiar with, and triggered by the association between food and shame. It's a strategy of communication known as a "dog whistle," in which a coded message is conveyed through words or phrases that are only understood by a certain group of people. While some people wouldn't give the label "reduced guilt" a second thought, those who are already at odds with their relationship with food would interpret it as a more personal insinuation. In this case, an insinuation that reinforces the harmful feelings they harbor toward food, which in return offers a simple solution in the form of the product being advertised. However, the phrase "reduced guilt" doesn't even promise to absolve its victims of this feeling entirely – only to minimize it, which still leaves them caught in a vicious cycle of fear, and a futile search for another product that might placate it. Although I did realize at a point in my adolescence that I was victim to this diabolical system, I still continued to wonder why diet products, specifically Wheat Thins, were such a staple food item in my household. My mother is a smart, educated woman, but sometimes

she would be afraid to eat fruit due to the sugar content. Instead, she would reach for the Wheat Thins, which she saw as a "safe" option despite her knowledge of the dangers of processed foods. If her goal was to achieve a genuine notion of health, then why was she was going about it so counterintuitively?

I found my answer in the adverts for Wheat Thins from the 1980's, which would have aired when my mother was an adolescent. All of the advertisements featured Sandy Duncan, a beautiful starlet who is as skinny as she is blonde. Each one also followed the same, exhaustive formula. First, Duncan gives a spiel on how she hates feeling guilty (for general things, like taking the complementary shampoo from hotels, removing the "do not remove tag" from pillows, etc.). She then concludes with the assertion that she can eat Wheat Thins because "[she] can love them all [she] wants, and not hate [herself] in the morning." Finally, the shameless Wheat Thins slogan, "great taste without the guilt," appears across the screen as Duncan pretends to take a bite out of a cracker. While it's definitely not news that women are force-fed the ideologies of the mass media, it's still important to recognize exactly *how* and *in what way* women have become products of the media's standards. Wheat Thins could have used anyone to represent their product, but chose Sandy Duncan not just because she was a familiar face, but because she embodied everything women were expected to be at the time. In Susan J. Douglas's book, "Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media," she discusses how the media has "played a key role in turning each one of us into not one woman but many women – a pastiche of all the good women and bad women that came to us through the printing presses, projectors, and airwaves of America" (13). This conception of the multifaceted, malleable woman influenced not only the way my eating disorder manifested, but the way I perceived myself among other women in general. Somehow, women are expected to find both virtue and

shame in hunger; to have the appetite of an NFL player, but never to eat like one; to love food as much as Sandy Duncan claims to, but also maintain her perfect physique. Diet products advertise themselves as a solution to this problem; that *finally,* there's something women can eat without feeling guilty about it.

Still, the Wheat Thin advertisements hit me with a wave of nauseous understanding. My mother's lifelong preoccupation with "health" and "diet" products – from the Garcinia Cambogia "weight loss" pills she kept hidden in her bottom drawer, to the "Sugar Free" Red Bull cans that littered the floor of her car, to the three boxes of "Reduced Guilt" Wheat Thins always stockpiled in the cupboard – made sense to me after so long. She grew up watching a beautiful, influential woman convince her that food is a vice. For the women watching the commercials, Sandy Duncan acted as the human equivalent of a dog whistle; circumventing the male audience, while sending the subtle message that Wheat Thins are one of the few, virtuous foods that women should not fear.

I seldom took the time to contemplate the relationship between my mother's eating disorder and my own, because I believed for so long that mine was just a pragmatic approach to basic health. I was so consumed by my disorder that I couldn't see that my compulsive habits and convictions regarding food had *nothing to do with health.* My mother worshipped Wheat Thins for the same reasons I would replace my three meals a day with protein bars – because they were advertised to make us feel safe from the horrors of real sustenance. The diet products instilled us with a feeling of righteousness, as if we were granted control over our emotions through the process of attaching moral evaluations to the food that we consume. If we wanted to feel good about ourselves, it was as simple as abstaining from carbs, eating a Lean Cuisine, or whatever else our brains decided would grant us the feeling of self-worth that we craved. We

found solace in the products that promised to put our anxieties at ease without risking our femininity, although these products were the very same things perpetuating our anxieties.

Works Cited

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