## Acknowledgments

This is a study of Christianity's powerful role in the shaping of American bodies and varied forms of embodiment. It aims to analyze both historical and present-day contexts, by examining a great deal of popular literature as well as probing encounters with people actively involved in religious fitness culture. While not focused solely on current American life, it responds to enduring societal preoccupations and sustains my long-term ethnographic commitments.

The project has undergone several periods of revision, and I owe considerable thanks. It seems proper to begin with the undergraduate and graduate students enrolling in my assorted courses on religion and the body at Princeton University, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Harvard Divinity School. From a diverse array of intellectual and practical commitments, these scholars tenaciously confronted the big questions linking up the inquiry's source material rather than opting for the sheltered comfort of small points. I hope a measure of their inspiring audacity abides in these pages.

I obtained valuable research assistance from Bernadette Arellano, Katy Attanasi, Tammy Brown, Alyson Dickson, Lexi Gelperin, Lauren Teichner, Eric Lyons Thomas, and Jane Yager. Jane also supplied perceptive editorial assistance in the final writing phase. Princeton and Harvard Universities provided necessary funds to pay these enterprising investigators and support other research services. The project received generous financial support, and two cohorts of exceptional colleagues, from the Material History of American Religion Project, directed by James Hudnut-Beumler and funded by the Lilly Endowment; and the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard Divinity School. Natalie Searl transcribed numerous interviews, while Jana Riess kept me informed of new literature relevant to my study.

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Thoughtful friends and associates too plentiful to name have shared a range of useful materials with me, and it is a pleasure to thank all of them here.

The Interlibrary Loan staff at Princeton University's Firestone Library helped make my research local when pregnancy and child care deterred travel plans, and I want especially to acknowledge Lois Nase, Patty Ponzoli, and Mark Santangelo. More thanks are due to David Tambo at the American Religions Collection at the University of California at Santa Barbara; C. Alan Anderson of the International New Thought Alliance; Jeannie Sklar at the National Anthropological Archives; and the staff at several libraries: the New York Public Library, including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; the Library of Congress; the Mary Baker Eddy Library for the Betterment of Humanity; and the Harvard University Libraries, including the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library, Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Houghton Library, and the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. Special thanks go to the photographer John Blazejewski.

Insightful discussions occurred among lecture-hall audiences at Oregon State University, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, the University of North Carolina, Loyola University, Northwestern University, Point Loma University, Berea College, Montclair State University, Rutgers University, Harvard Divinity School, and the University of Southern California. Colleagues at the American Academy of Religion, American Historical Association, and Society for the Anthropology of Religion annual meetings furnished valuable suggestions, particularly commentators Janet Jakobsen, J. Terry Todd, David Morgan, and Linda Barnes. In less formal venues, I received excellent feedback from the Religion and Culture Workshop at Princeton, the American Religion Colloquium at Harvard, and Material Religion Project meetings, as well as from my Harvard cohort of research associates—Paola Bacchetta, Kelly Pemberton, Brigid Sackey, and Elina Vuola—and our facilitator, Clarissa Atkinson. Dynamic and challenging exchanges with Anthea Butler, Claudia Highbaugh, and Monique Moultrie were indispensable for expanding my awareness of the complex factors that influence African American women's relationship to food and their bodies.

In addition to anonymous reviewers of journal articles and the full manuscript, helpful critics and conversation partners have included Gail Bederman, Ann Braude, Tom Bremer, Wendy Cadge, John Corrigan, Heather Curtis, Cynthia Eller, Marla Frederick, Stephanie Fysh, Heather Hendershot, Grace Hong, Kathryn Jay, Kimerer LaMothe, Laura Levitt, Melani McAlister, Colleen McDannell, Robert Orsi, Stephen Prothero, Noliwe Rooks, Dan Sack, Beryl Satter, Leigh Schmidt, Tim Watson, David

Watt, Judith Weisenfeld, Diane Winston, and Alan Wolfe. Cordial gratitude goes especially to those colleagues who read fledgling draft chapters and encouraged me to widen my scope.

The project has vastly benefited from the plethora of formal interviews, phone and e-mail exchanges, and casual discussions I have had with scores of women (and some men) who have participated in Christian diet programs or have had other relevant life experience. As with my previous book, God's Daughters, I have learned much from multiple interactions with persons holding worldviews quite different from my own. Some of these took place in formal weight-loss groups, others emerged in semi-anonymous seminar or conference encounters, more from student connections, and still others from online chat groups and e-mail communication. Many authors and influential public figures in the Christian fitness movement have been generous with their time and interest in this project; Carol Showalter and Neva Covle were especially gracious in welcoming differences of opinion and perspective. Well do I realize that some will not fully agree with my rendering of their multifaceted religious convictions. Their dissent may be especially sharp since I have grown increasingly troubled by certain social consequences (from the calculated to the inadvertent) of the flesh-conscious devotion many esteem.

I continue to uphold the ethnographic model of critical empathy described more fully in *God's Daughters* and so have endeavored to convey the humanity of complex persons and the subtlety of their religious practices. At the same time, I affirm the prerogative to appraise these, including discrepancies and unintended repercussions, in words that these subjects may not use or find flattering. This book, in fact, comments much more strongly than my earlier work upon social realities that some religious individuals have seemed to deny, ignore, or absolve from faith-based culpability. Such a collective refusal to acknowledge, say, religion's contributing role in the cultural exaltation of slender white bodies over other kinds has many sources—no one person or institution carries unique blame—but it would be wrong to collude in this process by portraying Christianity and its many well-meaning adherents as wholly innocent or blameless. I nonetheless hope that those interviewed took pleasure, as I did, from our exchanges and that they trust the earnestness compelling me to reflect frankly about matters they and I mutually consider of utmost importance. To the women in the mid-Atlantic region who so enthusiastically welcomed me to their devotional weight-loss classes and spent time and energy talking with me outside those spaces, my warmest thanks. I welcome confrontation and ongoing conversation about these vital and complex subjects.

Reed Malcolm, Dore Brown, Edith Gladstone, Patricia Deminna, and

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other members of the University of California Press editorial team have blended enthusiasm, patience, and professional expertise. I am grateful to them for helping bring this book to fruition.

For reasons each will recognize, my fullest appreciation extends to colleagues, friends, and family who have supported me in different ways throughout: Jennifer Lewis Gess, Becky Gould, Nannelle and Charles Griffith, David Hall, William Hutchison, Anita Kline, Courtney Bickel Lamberth, Robert Orsi, Barbara Savage, Ann and Roger Schmidt, Leigh Schmidt, Jeffrey Stout, and Robert Wuthnow. Leigh lived closest to this book and aided me through it; his encouragement has been imperative. Zachary and Ella have daily reminded me to stop working and start playing, while also embodying in their own passionate humanity the stakes claimed by this project. The book is for them.

No single work could treat anything approaching a total history of the body in American Christianity, and I do not purport to do so here. My aim, rather, has been to deal evenly with some influential episodes in ways that may illumine pressing, socially consequential themes. I admire the many teachers who have taught me to explore religious worlds inhabited by the living and the dead and to cherish connections forged among both. For remaining deficiencies, I remain wholly accountable.