

**'The food nature intended you to eat':
Nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse**

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Abstract

In this thesis I examine the low-carbohydrate diet trend as one response to the twin obesity and diabetes epidemics. Sociological and cultural studies of dieting to date have been dominated by feminist critique of the thin ideal. Because of their focus on health, low-carbohydrate diets cannot be adequately understood via a feminist approach. Instead, I take a multidisciplinary approach drawing on literature from cultural and literary theory, sociology, history and philosophy in the broader fields of food studies, public health and postcolonial studies. Methodologically, this thesis is based on a close reading of five bestselling low-carbohydrate diet books (*Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*, *The South Beach Diet*, *Protein Power*, *The Zone* and *Sugar Busters*), supplemented by interviews with low-carbohydrate dieters living in South Australia.

What I term *nutritional primitivism* is one of the distinguishing features of low-carbohydrate diet discourse, though it is not unique to low-carbohydrate dieting. I use the phrase *nutritional primitivism* to refer to the pursuit of supposedly simpler, more natural and more authentic ways of eating as part of a quest for health. I argue that nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse comprises appeals to Nature, nostalgia, authentic ethnic cuisine, evolutionary theory and genetics, and images of the Noble Savage. Together these form a reactive response to modern Western nutrition: that is, a backlash against modern Western ways of eating as they impact upon health.

This thesis offers a critique of nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse. Nutritional primitivism presents both logical/evidential and political/philosophical difficulties. Its definitions of natural and authentic food and evolutionary diet are tautological, and it uses a highly romanticised image of the past to criticise modern Western diet. Further, nutritional primitivism relies on Eurocentric and racist evolutionary hierarchies which align contemporary fourth-world peoples with prehistoric hunter-gatherers. In proposing a return to more 'natural' and 'traditional' ways of eating as the solution to obesity and diabetes, nutritional primitivism also obscures known socioeconomic and environmental factors in the development of ill-health and disease.

In interviews with low-carbohydrate dieters I found a critical approach and heterogeneous response to nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse. Like low-carbohydrate diet authors, dieters generally privileged natural foods above processed foods, but their dieting practice might best be described as a creative reworking of culinary tradition, rather than any simple reclamation of a so-called authentic diet. Dieters demonstrated a critical and sceptical approach towards evolutionary and genetic justifications for low-carbohydrate diets.

While popular critique of modern Western ways of eating is an integral part of response to the obesity and diabetes epidemics, nutritional primitivism in low-carbohydrate diet discourse reinforces a romanticised view of the past, racist and utilitarian attitudes towards non-Western people, and the elision of socioeconomic and environmental factors which promote inequalities in ill-health and disease.

Thesis declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis being made available in the University Library.

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1. Christine Knight. 'Nostalgia and Authenticity in Low-Carbohydrate Dieting.' In *Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2005: Authenticity in the Kitchen*. Ed. Richard Hosking. Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2006. 272-82.
2. Christine Knight. "'The Food Nature Intended You to Eat": Low-Carbohydrate Diets and Primitivist Philosophy.' In *The Atkins Diet and Philosophy: Chewing the Fat with Kant and Nietzsche*. Ed. Lisa Heldke, Kerri Mommer, and Cynthia Pineo. Chicago: Open Court, 2005. 43-56.

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What we are seeing in the United States today is the full-tilt exploration of patterns formed in the 1920s: fascination with the primitive as an expression of fears about what the West has wrought in the world, even of white European self-loathing – often with an accompanying utopian impetus for change. Utopian desires are emerging strongly once again at the end of the twentieth century, in movements that envision the primitive as a locus of harmony and as a shelter from the dangers and fragmentation of modern life.¹

¹ Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 18.