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**Citation for published version:**

Knight, C 2011, 'If You're Not Allowed to Have Rice, What Do You Have with Your Curry?': Nostalgia and Tradition in Low-Carbohydrate Diet Discourse and Practice' *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 16, no. 2, 8. DOI: 10.5153/sro.2342

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.5153/sro.2342](https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.2342)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Sociological Research Online

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Knight, C. (2011). 'If You're Not Allowed to Have Rice, What Do You Have with Your Curry?': Nostalgia and Tradition in Low-Carbohydrate Diet Discourse and Practice. *Sociological Research Online*, 16(2), [8]. 10.5153/sro.2342

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## 'If You're Not Allowed to Have Rice, What Do You Have with Your Curry?': Nostalgia and Tradition in Low-Carbohydrate Diet Discourse and Practice

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*Sociological Research Online*, 16 (2) 8  
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/2/8.html>>  
10.5153/sro.2342

Received: 10 Mar 2011 Accepted: 30 Apr 2011 Published: 31 May 2011

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### Abstract

Low-carbohydrate diets, notably the Atkins Diet, were particularly popular in Britain and North America in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This paper approaches the low-carbohydrate trend as one response to the twin obesity and diabetes epidemics, drawing firstly on a discourse analysis of bestselling low-carbohydrate diet books, especially *The South Beach Diet* (Agatston 2003). I explore and critique nostalgia in the low-carbohydrate movement as a response to a perceived contemporary health crisis caused by modern Western food habits and lifestyle. The low-carbohydrate literature demonstrates a powerful discursive combination of nostalgia for pre-industrial Western foodways, and valorisation of 'authentic ethnic' (non-Western) culinary traditions. Together, these tropes construct a generalised notion of traditional diet which contrasts positively with a putative 'modern Western diet'. The binary opposition set up between modern Western food habits and a traditional ideal leads to generalisations and factual inaccuracies, as any diet or cuisine that is not modern, and/or not Western, must be adjusted discursively to fit the low-carbohydrate model. Further, in an interview study with low-carbohydrate dieters, dieters' descriptions of their experiences did not match the nostalgic rhetoric of popular low-carbohydrate manuals. Instead, I found that the requirement to eliminate staple carbohydrate foods severs dieters both practically and symbolically from culinary tradition, whether their own or that of an ethnic Other. I conclude that there is a disjuncture between the romantic 'nutritional nostalgia' (Beardsworth 2002) of the diet books, and dieters' own food practices.

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**Keywords:** Food, Diet, Nutrition, Discourse, Nostalgia, Tradition, Cultural Identity, Obesity

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### Introduction

**1.1** Low-carbohydrate diets, including the Atkins Diet, South Beach Diet and Sugar Busters (Atkins 2002; Agatston 2003; Steward et al. 1998), experienced a surge of popularity in the United States, Britain and other English-speaking Western nations in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the fifteen years 1993-2008, *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution* was the second-bestselling book in the United States, topped only by *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997). *The South Beach Diet* was at number 11 in the same list (see <[http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2008-10-29-top-150-books\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2008-10-29-top-150-books_N.htm)>). Proponents of low-carbohydrate diets claim that obesity and related health conditions can be blamed on excess consumption of carbohydrate-rich foods, especially those high in refined carbohydrates such as white flour and sugar. They therefore recommend a diet which restricts or eliminates these foods as the solution to weight problems and other 'diseases of civilisation', especially Type 2 diabetes. While low-carbohydrate diets remain scientifically controversial (see Knight Forthcoming), their recent popularity may in part be considered a response, both practical and discursive, to the so-called obesity epidemic. In particular, the low-carbohydrate diet movement seeks a way of eating that is antithetical to the 'modern Western diet' said to cause obesity – a way of eating that is *not* modern and *not* Western. The turn away from the modern Western diet leads to the foodways and cuisines of other times and other places (pre-industrial and non-Western cultures) as models for dieters to follow.

**1.2** Previous sociological research on dieting, both theoretical and empirical, has largely comprised feminist critique of the thin ideal (Bordo 1993; Germov & Williams 1996a, 1996b, 1999; McKinley 1999). More recently, sociologists have considered the moralising and discriminatory effects of obesity discourse (Boero 2007; Gard & Wright 2005; Murray 2008; Saguy & Almeling 2008; Saguy & Gruys 2010). In some

cases this critique builds on earlier sociological work on the size acceptance movement (eg Sobal 1999). I share the concerns of both these groups of critics, although both the obesity epidemic and low-carbohydrate movement have arguably weakened the association of dieting with women. Concern about obesity has shifted weight-loss coverage in the media away from women specifically (Boero 2007: 44n1), and low-carbohydrate diets seem to appeal particularly to men (Bentley 2005), with at least one survey showing that men are much more likely than women to follow a low-carbohydrate diet long-term (Blanck et al. 2006). Low-carbohydrate diets forego 'appearance claims' in favour of urgent warnings about the dangers of the modern Western diet (Mouton 2001: para 19). In this article I therefore take a somewhat different approach, examining the particular form of the cultural and discursive response to the obesity epidemic represented by the low-carbohydrate diet movement. I situate my critique in relation to previous work in sociology and food studies on themes of nostalgia and cultural identity (eg Pickering & Keightley 2006; Valentine 1999), which are especially relevant topics in the context of dietary change, both individual and cultural.

**1.3** My discourse analysis focuses on *The South Beach Diet* and its quest for food traditions which ostensibly reflect an authentic sense of connection between body, labour, land and food. Firstly, I consider *South Beach's* nostalgia for less mechanised Western lifestyles of decades past. Secondly, I analyse its idealised representations of contemporary Asian and Mediterranean foodways. Together, these tropes privilege a generalised notion of tradition as the antithesis of Western nutritional modernity, mapping neatly onto the model of Culinary Luddism proposed by Laudan (1999). Laudan notes too that Culinary Luddites (for example, Slow Food adherents) 'seek out pre-industrial foods, either by digging into the history of food or by exploring ethnic byways' (para 1). Finally, I compare this textual analysis with the results of an interview study with low-carbohydrate dieters. Dieters' descriptions of their experiences did not match the nostalgic rhetoric of popular low-carbohydrate manuals. Instead, I found that the requirement to eliminate staple carbohydrate foods severs dieters both practically and symbolically from culinary tradition, whether their own or that of an ethnic Other. I conclude that there is a disjuncture between the romantic 'nutritional nostalgia' (Beardsworth 2002) of the diet books, and dieters' own food practices.

## Research methods

**2.1** This paper draws on research for a broader project on low-carbohydrate dieting (Knight 2008) that was conducted in two phases: a critical reading of popular low-carbohydrate diet books (Phase 1) followed by interviews with low-carbohydrate dieters (Phase 2). Texts for analysis in Phase 1 were selected based on book sales in the United States (the 'home' of low-carbohydrate dieting) and Australia (where interviews were to be carried out in Phase 2) (see <<http://content.usatoday.com/life/books/booksdatabase/default.aspx>> and <[http://www.publishers.asn.au/publications.cfm?doc\\_id=33](http://www.publishers.asn.au/publications.cfm?doc_id=33)>). The two most popular low-carbohydrate diet books in both countries were *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution* (Atkins 2002) and *The South Beach Diet* (Agatston 2003), with *South Beach* (first published most recently) the only low-carbohydrate text remaining on bestseller charts into 2006 and 2007, when the interview study was carried out. Nostalgia was one of a set of related research foci that emerged from initial thematic analysis of bestselling low-carbohydrate manuals. Discourse analysis for this project was informed by techniques of literary analysis (close reading) applied to non-fiction texts, as in cultural studies (Culler 1997: 46). In this paper I also place popular low-carbohydrate diet books in social and scientific context, identifying and correcting factual errors in the texts with reference to interdisciplinary scholarship on food history and culture.

**2.2** In the second part of this paper I compare the thematically-focussed critical reading of low-carbohydrate diet books with interview data also related to the theme of nostalgia. I take a social constructivist perspective; that is, although I compare 'what dieters say' with 'what diet books say', I do not seek to 'adjudicate between accounts' to establish some 'truth' about low-carbohydrate dieting, by triangulating methods and data (Silverman 2006: 292). Rather, this paper examines the extent to which a persuasive but ultimately flawed discourse, circulating widely in bestselling low-carbohydrate diet books, permeates dieters' ideas and experiences 'on the ground'. Reader-response research, in particular the literature on self-help book reading, suggests that readers do not 'swallow' the (self-help) text whole (Radway 1984; Radway 1986). Rather, readers are *active*, *selective* and *interpretive* in their reading, and 'pick and choose' ideas and information from multiple sources (Coyle & Grodin 1993; Grodin 1991; Lichterman 1992). By interviewing low-carbohydrate dieters, I aimed to investigate whether these conclusions also apply to readers of diet books, a specific form of self-help text (Kissling 1995). Thus in Phase 2 of analysis for this paper I asked: to what extent do dieters take up the discourse of nostalgia that circulates in the low-carbohydrate literature?

**2.3** In-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 15 low-carbohydrate dieters (12 women, 3 men; 22-59 years) in South Australia between February and April 2006. Topics covered included dieters' motivations, practices, experiences, and beliefs and attitudes about low-carbohydrate dieting and nutrition. Participants were recruited via a media release and a South Australian public radio interview. Study design was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committees of the University of Adelaide and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) Human Nutrition Division. In analysing the data derived from the interviews with low-carbohydrate dieters, I followed a critical method close to that used to analyse the low-carbohydrate diet texts, in order to maintain a level of methodological and interpretative consistency. Interview transcripts were coded according to emerging categories derived from both the interview data themselves and low-carbohydrate diet texts. Subsequent discourse analysis was again informed by methods of literary criticism and close reading, allowing detailed attention to the discursive manoeuvres via which participants constructed their dieting experiences and their meaning.

## Nutritional nostalgia and *The South Beach Diet*

**3.1** Following Marcus (2004), I regard the essential quality of nostalgia as 'a sense of loss regarding the past'. Tracing the history of the word *nostalgia*, Marcus notes:

Nostalgia originally referred to memories of a specific home, a geographic location that could not be left without danger of emotional or physical collapse. In a society marked by geographic mobility, nostalgia has shifted in its meaning to connote a sense of loss regarding the past, beyond the appeal of just one location. This past can be remembered as a collection of intensely personal memories, but more often also contains elements of group or public memories, representations and notions circulating in broader social circles. (26)

**3.2** Importantly, this definition highlights the role of memory (whether individual, group, or public) in producing and perpetuating nostalgia (see also Pickering & Keightley 2006). The sustaining function of memory in nostalgia indicates several related features of the nostalgic mode. Firstly, nostalgia operates on a relatively short historical time-frame, measured in decades or (characteristically) generations. Secondly, nostalgia privileges memories of childhood, as well as family ties formed in childhood, especially intergenerational relationships between mother / child and grandparent / child. Finally, as a sense of longing for what has been lost, nostalgia relies on emotion or affect for its power. All these tropes are evident in *South Beach*, which demonstrates a profound sense of loss in relation to Western culture, and a strong tendency to project certain ostensibly lost qualities (such as vitality, authenticity and simplicity) onto an earlier time.

**3.3** The following passage from *South Beach* (Agatston 2003) forms part of an explanation for the rising incidence today of Type 2 diabetes, especially in adolescents and young people, which Agatston claims is a function of relatively recent, post-industrial changes in diet and lifestyle:

Once, the carbs we ate were less processed than they are today. More of our bread was baked at home or in local bakeries, not factories, and was made with whole grains, not flour that had been overly processed and stripped of all fibre. Back then, convenience and speedy preparation weren't the highest ideals food aspired to – we were in less of a rush, and home cooking meant starting with raw ingredients. Rice had more of its fibre intact, and had to be cooked slowly. Potatoes weren't sliced and frozen or powdered and bought in a box. Children's after-school snacks weren't limited to what could be microwaved. (73)

**3.4** The focus here is on starchy comfort foods such as bread, rice and potatoes, all foods which are banned or severely restricted on the South Beach Diet. Paradoxically, this perhaps heightens the sense of nostalgic longing they evoke in readers, while alerting the critic to a potential disjuncture between textual discourse and low-carbohydrate dieting practice. The references in this passage to childhood, home baking and slow cooking all strengthen the nostalgic mood. The very structure of the passage is nostalgic, constructed according to a temporal opposition between *once* or *back then*, and *today*. As I have noted elsewhere, '*Back then* represents local production, whole foods, and a slower pace of life. *Today* [...] means industrial production, instant food, and parents who are too busy to cook for their children' (Knight 2006: 276). Yet the picture of today is entirely implicit. Although the passage purports to depict an unnamed earlier period, virtually every phrase is constructed either comparatively or negatively. Carbs were *less* processed, *more* bread was home-baked, we were *less* rushed, and rice had *more* fibre. Bread was *not* baked in factories, flour was *not* fibre-stripped, speed and convenience *weren't* our highest ideals, potatoes *weren't* powdered, snacks *weren't* microwaved.

**3.5** As Pickering and Keightley point out in their article on nostalgia, 'A representational cycle of negative present and positive past promotes meanings made by means of opposition, contradistinction and dichotomous contrast' (2006: 925). The grammatical structure of the passage indicates that *South Beach* invokes nostalgia to stress what contemporary Western life might lack, rather than painting an accurate picture of any given historical period. Even if we assume that the passage refers to the United States, it is factually inconsistent. For instance, white bread began to be commonly consumed in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the introduction of high-speed steel-roller milling. But factory-based industrial bread production did not take over from domestic and local baking until much later, around the middle of the twentieth century (Levenstein 2003: 22). The tone of the passage suggests a domestic ideal popularly centred on the 1950s. But it is not possible to identify any single period to which Agatston might be referring. Instead, the nostalgic vision functions to identify what is lacking in Western society today: a 'sense of local community', the home 'as a source of nourishment and a symbolic center in our lives', and an invisible but hard-working female presence in the kitchen (Knight 2005: 49).<sup>[2]</sup>

**3.6** The positioning of woman behind the scenes as home-maker is integral to this nostalgic paradigm, which depends upon a conservative set of gender relations structured around the heterosexual nuclear family. Agatston's nostalgia slips easily over the question of who is doing the work entailed by his rose-tinted vision: baking bread, boiling rice, peeling potatoes, feeding hungry children. Of course, the iconic (but absent) figure here is the mother and housewife (although in an earlier era this might equally have been a servant). In an article on nostalgia in rural Australian tourism writing, Duruz (1999) notes the omnipresence of 'Mother' in representations of country, home, and food:

meanings of "home" are condensed into its pivotal figure – the "mother" of shelled peas, baked scones and freshly brewed tea. Of course, this is the mother who is *always* there, shelling, baking, brewing, and ensuring food is fresh, hot and ever ready. (102, original italics)

**3.7** Duruz places 'Mother' in a 'beguiling ensemble of identities (country woman/"grandma"/"Mum") [which] await our nostalgic investment' (101), noting slyly that although the tourist 'certainly does not want to be "grandma" in any substantial way, I suspect she [or he] wants to *have* a "grandma" (and don't we all?)' (103, original italics). As Duruz implies, the lofty 'ideals' (I mimic Agatston's term deliberately) of home baking, from-scratch cooking and ever-ready hot food and drink are all very well when all one has to do is turn up and be served. Agatston is on dangerous ground here: it is but a small step from *South Beach*-style nostalgia to the hard-line conservative position that feminism has caused childhood obesity by taking mothers out of the home, leading to a generation of TV-watching, junk-food-eating children (Eberstadt

2003). This position might well alienate the thousands, if not millions, of working mothers (not to mention single parents) amongst *South Beach's* readers.

## The authentic ethnic

**4.1** Nostalgic renderings of historical Western food traditions produce meaning, I have argued, via a strategic and constructed comparison between today and yesterday. Likewise, romantic representations of what Laudan (1999: para 1) calls the 'ethnic byways' of contemporary global food culture produce meaning via a strategic comparison between the West and its Other. Laudan (2001) makes this same point regarding the comparative or binaristic structure of Culinary Luddism (though dietary fat does not have the same valence in low-carbohydrate discourse as it does, according to Laudan, in Culinary Luddism):

The Luddite's fable of disaster [...] gains credence not from scholarship but from evocative dichotomies: fresh and natural versus processed and preserved; local versus global; slow versus fast; artisanal and traditional versus urban and industrial; healthful versus contaminated and fatty. (36)

**4.2** In the English-speaking West, the word 'ethnic' refers broadly to cultures and cuisines deemed somehow exotic or 'foreign'. At its most inclusive (or exclusive, depending on one's point of view), the word 'ethnic' encompasses all non-Anglo-Saxon food cultures. Heldke (2003) writes that 'German food is ethnic, but Italian food is more ethnic, and Greek food more ethnic still' (51). As Heldke's comment indicates, the traditional foodways of Mediterranean Europe, including Greece, Italy, southern France, and Spain, function as exotic and 'Other' in relation to the contemporary diet of Americans, Britons and Australians.

**4.3** Questions of nutrition and health do not enter into Heldke's critique of the American penchant for ethnic food. Heldke focuses instead on 'food adventuring' as a gastronomic practice, and a means by which the food adventurer may accrue cultural capital (Heldke 2003: 16-17; Bourdieu 1984). However, ethnic foodways are frequently also the subject of health claims in contemporary nutrition discourse. Health-conscious Americans and Australians eat sushi, stir-fry, or pasta, shunning the roast beef, mashed potato and suet puddings of Anglo-Saxon culinary tradition. To paraphrase Heldke, we might think of these health-conscious consumers as 'diet adventurers': those of us who eat the food of the Other because we believe it to be healthier than our own. Foremost amongst the ethnic foodways sought out by diet adventurers are those of the Mediterranean region. Over the last fifty years, the so-called 'Med Diet' has been translated into a health regime for Americans, Australians, northern Europeans and others outside the Mediterranean countries themselves (Lisaght 2006; Matalas et al. 2002; Willett 2006). It has its own ever-expanding academic and popular literature, its own diet pyramid, and even its own packaging symbol, the 'Med Mark' (see <<http://mediterraneanmark.org/TheMedMark2.htm>>). The nutritional privilege accorded the Mediterranean diet derives directly from epidemiological research on heart disease led by Dr Ancel Keys in the decades following World War II, in particular the well-known Seven Countries Study (Keys 1980). Willett (2006: 105) points out that Keys's work 'had profound effects upon dietary recommendations in the 1960s and 1970s' and (I would add) beyond. The Seven Countries Study found that saturated fat consumption was strongly associated with heart-disease risk, while Mediterranean populations who consumed other types of fat had very low rates of heart disease. These findings ultimately led to the low-fat guidelines of the 1980s, as well as the higher-fat 'Med Diet' alternative (Willett 2006; Santich 1995: 164).

**4.5** Many popular low-carbohydrate diet books, especially those which allow dieters to eat whole grains, endorse the nutritional benefits of traditional Mediterranean eating habits, as well as those of other ethnic food traditions (as I discuss below). *Sugar Busters*, for example, rehearses familiar praise for the Mediterranean diet, focussing (as is usual) on key foodstuffs thought to protect against heart disease, especially olive oil and red wine:

low rates of coronary artery disease occur in Mediterranean countries where the population consumes a large percentage of their calories as [...] monounsaturated fats, primarily in the form of olive oil. (Steward et al. 1998: 32)

the death rate from heart attacks is lowest in countries where wine is habitually consumed, such as France, Italy, and Spain. (Steward et al. 1998: 37)

In *South Beach*, Agatston advises readers that Mediterranean cuisine is a healthy choice when eating out:

Go to restaurants serving Mediterranean-style food. [...] I'm thinking of Greek and Middle Eastern food. These are cuisines that employ lots of olive oil, which is always a plus. You can have hummus [...] on pitta bread, which is a big improvement over white bread and butter, and it's more flavoursome, too. You'll find good, whole grains such as tabouleh and couscous, which takes the place of potatoes or rice. And usually, these cuisines rely on spices and condiments rather than sweeteners to make the dishes taste good. (Agatston 2003: 79-80)

It is worth noting the extreme reductionism of this passage, and of the 'Med Diet' concept itself. 'Mediterranean' functions in this passage as an umbrella-term for a very wide range of regional cuisines, and 'Middle Eastern' as a subsidiary 'umbrella' covering every culinary variation from Turkey to Iran to Egypt.

**4.6** Agatston seems determined to make these quintessentially ethnic cuisines fit his own preconceived model of healthy diet. According to *South Beach*, a healthy diet consists of so-called 'good fats' such as olive oil, limited whole grains, and only minute quantities of sugar (if any at all). It is logically imperative, then, that these features are identified in ethnic cuisines, and certainly not in the obesogenic American

diet. Hence, for example, Agatston names couscous as a 'good, whole grain', even though it is not a whole grain but is made from semolina, itself a by-product of wheat processing. While it makes sense that Agatston should prefer hummus to butter, given that he generally favours vegetable fats over animal fats, why this should extend to a preference for pitta bread over white bread is not clear. Although pitta bread can be made in wholemeal versions, when served in a restaurant in the United States or Britain it is highly likely to be made with refined white flour. In the logic of *South Beach*, pitta bread is healthier by definition because it is ethnic, reflecting Agatston's antipathy toward white bread and all it represents. The idea that hummus with pitta is 'more flavoursome' than white bread and butter betrays a kind of reverse gastronomic snobbery, in which ethnic food is deemed intrinsically tastier, as well as healthier, than Euroamerican meals. Finally, Agatston's claim that Middle Eastern and Greek cuisines do not usually use added sweeteners is belied by the liberal use of honey in many Greek dishes, the sugar content of certain Middle Eastern condiments (such as pomegranate molasses), and the intense, syrupy sweetness of Greek and Middle Eastern pastries and desserts.

**4.7** Heldke points out that food adventurers 'are usually looking for more than a novel or exotic eating experience. Adventurers want those experiences to be authentic' (2003: 23). Likewise, the dedicated diet adventurer should assiduously seek out the *authentic* ethnic meal, whether Asian, Middle Eastern, or Italian.<sup>[3]</sup> Agatston advises:

if you *do* go Italian, try to structure the meal the way they do in Italy – in courses, with a modest serving of *al dente* pasta topped with a healthy tomato sauce, followed by a main course of meat or fish and fresh vegetables [...] In Italy, you don't sit down in front of a huge dish of pasta with a bottomless bread basket and call it dinner. That's why Italians can eat pasta twice a day and not suffer the obesity rates we see in the United States. (80, original italics)

**4.8** In this passage, authenticity derives from serving the same food, in the same order, combination, and portion size, as it would (ostensibly) be served in its country of origin. Similarly, *Sugar Busters* advises dieters to follow a traditional French meal structure of an appetiser, main course, and salad in place of dessert (Steward et al. 1998: 196). (Note the omission here of either cheese or dessert, which might follow the salad in a full French meal.) This 'authentic' French meal pattern should result in a slender French waistline and healthy heart (see also Guiliano 2005). In the passage cited above, Agatston makes clear that the *inauthentic* ethnic, which couples grossly distorted portion size with a garbled meal structure, has been instrumental to the health crisis which the United States now faces. Agatston also alerts dieters to the insidious corruption of authentic ethnic foods via invisible pre-processing. For example, the rice served in Asian restaurants in the West is more processed than it would have been traditionally, he claims:

Asians have always used the whole grain, meaning the fibre is there, too, and your digestive system has to work to get at the starch. In this country, and even increasingly in Asian cities, a more processed variety of white rice is used. (80)

Readers by now know that more processing means less fibre, less nutrients and an unhealthy rush of blood sugar and insulin.

**4.9** I noted above the many inaccuracies in Agatston's representation of Greek and Middle Eastern foods; similar inaccuracies occur in his depiction of Italian and Asian foods. For instance, the idea that Asians have 'always' used whole-grain rice is not correct. Just as white bread has historically been preferred in Western countries where bread is the staple food (Laudan 2001: 41), white rice has historically been favoured in Asia and has therefore functioned as a mark of social status, with brown rice the lot of the lower classes. The idea that brown rice (or brown bread, for that matter) is 'authentic' or traditional reflects contemporary Western beliefs about the health benefits of fibre, not the historical record. In other words, both the *authentic* ethnic and the *inauthentic* ethnic in the passages I have cited from *South Beach* are Agatston's own constructions as an outsider. Drawing on the work of Trinh Minh-ha (1989), Heldke points out that:

The Other (the oriental, the native, the primitive) regarded by Westerners as authentic is in fact an Other of Western design. The authenticity of this Other (indeed, the very project of authenticating) is established against a standard constructed outside the Other's own culture, in the West, and for Western purposes. (2003: 44, footnotes omitted)

**4.10** The standard against which Agatston defines the authentic Other is his own very definite beliefs about nutrition. Thus, for example, an authentic Italian meal according to Agatston is pasta with a tomato sauce followed by meat and vegetables. This formula obscures regional variation in Italian cuisine and effectively excludes as *inauthentic*, because supposedly unhealthy, the creamy pasta sauces and other dairy-based dishes of northern Italy. Agatston's Italian menu also revolves around a meat-based central dish, reflecting wealthier urban Italian traditions rather than those of poorer rural areas. Agatston peremptorily dictates the authentic ethnic even in its place of origin: authentic Asian food is said to be under threat from industrialisation even in Asia itself (Knight 2006: 275). Similarly, Atkins (2002: 25) suggests that the traditional French diet and, consequently, the health of French men and women are now under threat from American-style fast food. The anxiety that Western industrialised foods may 'engulf [...] traditional ethnic foods' is one of the driving forces behind Culinary Luddist movements such as Slow Food (Laudan 1999: para 1). In low-carbohydrate discourse, the effect of such claims is to imply that authentic ethnic diets should be preserved intact for Western diet adventurers, lest they disappear forever as a mine of nutritional evidence. Such a preservationist agenda denies the people who live (on) these cuisines day-in and day-out the agency to define and recreate them daily in their culinary practice.

**4.11** The suggestion that the authentic ethnic is under threat even in its places of origin also renders authenticity, and therefore health, doubly distant from the modern West, in time as well as in space (Knight

2006: 275). Despite Agatston's repeated exhortations that dieters seek out the authentic ethnic meal, he ultimately implies that ethnic cuisine on Western tables can never be authentic. Western dieters may seek to become Other, health-wise, by eating the Other's food. But their own greed (in Agatston's eyes), and the food industry which panders to it, continually subvert this desire. Agatston explains that when the United States government first recommended that Americans reduce dietary fat, 'it was thought that the new low-fat American diet would mimic the low-fat, high-carb regime of countries like China and Japan, which had very low heart attack rates.' But this was not to be:

the US food industry stepped in to provide us with low-fat foods that tasted good. It created delicious, highly processed foods including biscuits and baked goods prominently (and accurately) advertised as low fat, no cholesterol. (17)

**4.12** It is notable that the final chapter of Part I of Agatston's text is entitled 'Why Do People Fail on the South Beach Diet?' – an admission which makes the meal plans and recipes which follow in Part II seem somewhat redundant. One of the major reasons that Agatston cites for failure is the stress of modern American life, with its high-speed travel and heavy work demands, which disrupt the best-laid diet plans (Agatston 2003: 94-5). Despite itself, *South Beach* thus ends by implying that the West can never be healthy because it can never be authentic. In keeping with the binaristic structure of low-carbohydrate discourse, authenticity resides, by Agatston's own definition, in other places and other times.

### **Dieters' accounts: family traditions and ethnic food**

**5.1** Thus far in this paper I have argued that low-carbohydrate diet books such as *South Beach* evince both nostalgia for Western foodways of decades past, and a romantic view of 'authentic' ethnic foodways today. Healthy, authentic and traditional ways of eating are defined historically and geographically in opposition to the obesogenic diet of the contemporary English-speaking West. While there is limited literature in the humanities and social sciences on low-carbohydrate diets, this reading contrasts with Bentley's interpretation of the Atkins Diet. Bentley (2004) argues that Atkins might actually be regarded as an 'antiethnic' diet, because it seemingly excludes less affluent 'peasant' meals (such as stir-fry, casserole and stroganoff) which stretch a small amount of meat protein by combining it with carbohydrates. She suggests instead that 'the cuisine formula of the Atkins diet has a 1950s American gestalt': meat plus two vegetables, 'but minus the starch' (40). She concludes:

the current popularity of Atkins is due in part to its Americanness – built on large chunks of animal flesh, particularly red meat – the same high-status food that has traditionally stood for abundance, wealth, and power. (44)

**5.2** At first glance, Bentley's conclusion might seem to support my own argument that low-carbohydrate diet books such as *South Beach* lament the loss of healthy pre-industrial Western foodways. However, Bentley suggests that the stereotypically 'traditional' American diet revolves around 'seemingly unlimited portions of animal flesh', and that this is replicated in the Atkins Diet (40). By contrast, my own reading of *South Beach* notes Agatston's nostalgia for starchy comfort foods such as bread, rice and potatoes.

**5.3** Bentley's conclusion depends in large part on her exclusive focus on Atkins, as well as the assumption that heavy consumption of red meat is the hallmark of low-carbohydrate dieting, which is by no means necessarily the case (Feinman et al. 2006). More importantly, the enormous popularity of the Atkins Diet has not been restricted to the United States, and it seems unlikely that Australian, British, Canadian, or South African dieters would be attracted to Atkins because of its 'Americanness'. It would certainly be arguable that the popularity of the Atkins Diet in countries like Britain and Australia derives in part from the association of red meat with parallel British and Australian histories of 'abundance, wealth, and power'. Australian economic and cultural history is inseparable from cattle- and sheep-grazing, for example, and Australian colonial settlers ate enormous quantities of meat (Santich 1995: 13). Such associations were not entirely absent from my interviews with South Australian dieters. One interviewee, who lived on a farm outside Adelaide, mentioned that she found a low-carbohydrate diet easy to follow because it exploited her family's direct supply of meat:

You see with us, we have our own meat, and so [...] to have a protein meal, protein at every meal, is a much cheaper option [...] we start all our meals by getting the meat first and then you put round the rest of it [...]. (Judith, 50s)

**5.4** However, Judith's farming experience was the exception rather than the rule. Younger dieters in particular, including Atkins dieters, tended to name their most usual dieting dinner as curry or stir-fry. Tracey, for example, an Atkins Dieter, said:

I knew most vegetables you could have so for dinner I'd have stir-fries. I just sort of varied, you know I'd have a bit of protein, then I'd have vegetables so you can do a lot with those combinations. (Tracey, 20s)

**5.5** The key feature of the low-carbohydrate dieting experience, predictably, was the absence of starchy foods and grains, the factor Bentley encapsulates in the phrase 'minus the starch' (Bentley 2004: 40). No matter whether dieters ate grilled meat plus vegetables, or Asian- or Italian-style food, the subtraction of starch ruptured the traditional meal pattern. For some dieters, this rupture was a source of creativity to be embraced. For others the removal of starch was experienced as a traumatic incursion into family food traditions, although this did not necessarily deter dieters from their new eating plan. But in either case, the absence of starch mitigated against any experience of low-carbohydrate dieting as a reclamation of culinary tradition, whether one's own or that of an ethnic Other. As foreshadowed earlier, there thus appears to be a disjuncture between diet-book authors' attempts to position their regimes as a means to reconnect with the 'authentic' food traditions of other times and other places, and the lived experience or

practice of low-carbohydrate dieting. Interviewees' experiences primarily reflected, instead, Probyn's suggestion that low-carbohydrate dieters must 'divorce' themselves from millennia-old traditions of global sustenance based on staple starches like bread, rice and corn (Probyn 2003). In other words, although many low-carbohydrate dieters whom I interviewed generally ate ethnic-style meals, and some on the other hand ate 'traditional' Western-style meals with a protein centre, in neither case could these meal patterns be regarded as 'authentic' according to any pre-existing culinary tradition.

**5.6** Dieters whom I interviewed repeatedly described adjusting certain traditional meal combinations to suit the low-carbohydrate prescription, either by simply removing the starch component, or by substituting the starch with a low-carbohydrate alternative, such as a lower-carbohydrate grain or pulse or a non-starchy vegetable. For instance, Sarah (30s) explained:

I would cook the same thing [for myself and the rest of the family] but I wouldn't eat the carbohydrates. [...] So for example [...] if I cooked curry I would serve up rice for everyone else but I wouldn't eat it.

**5.7** Similarly, other interviewees described substituting lower-carbohydrate lentil dhal for rice or bread with curry (Karen, 30s); cabbage for spaghetti when serving spaghetti bolognese to the rest of the family (Michelle, 30s); and green beans in place of penne, served with a pasta sauce (Jessica, 30s). Of course, both spaghetti bolognese and (especially) curry are notoriously 'inauthentic' or bastardised versions of traditional Indian and Italian dishes respectively (Heldke 2003: 33-9). But my point here is that the combinations of 'curry' with rice, and *ragù* with spaghetti, have acquired an authenticity of their own in Anglo-Saxon food culture. Low-carbohydrate dieting forcibly ruptures these established pairings and destroys any accrued sense of culinary tradition. It is worth comparing the strategies these dieters describe with the eating-out advice from *South Beach* that I discussed earlier. A sense of culinary authenticity does influence Karen and Jessica on some level: Karen matches curry with dhal, both Indian foods; Jessica matches tomato sauce with green beans, a plausibly Italian combination. But in preparing their meals, Sarah, Karen, Michelle and Jessica do not seek the kind of ethnic authenticity that Agatston recommends, in which authenticity derives from serving foods in the order, combination and portion size in which they might be served in their native country.

**5.8** As I noted above, for some dieters, like Jessica, this culinary rupture was experienced as a stimulus to creativity and something to be embraced. Jessica suggested that her 'creativity in the kitchen' had been a valuable asset in her long-term adherence to a low-carbohydrate diet, which she had been following for two and a half years at the time of her interview:

it's been a lot easier for me than it has for other people because I have a reasonable amount [...] of creativity in the kitchen, such that I can look at what's available and say "Ah, okay, we'll do that" or if I'm, say, picking up a recipe and it's got too many carbs in it I can interpret it. (Jessica, 30s)

John (50s), another long-term low-carber of three years' duration, reported that he took over all the household cooking when he began the diet, and now spends time on weekends looking for new recipes which he will adapt to suit his own requirements.

**5.9** By contrast, other dieters experienced the culinary rupture of low-carbohydrate dieting as a traumatic incursion into long-established family meal traditions, whether English, Irish, Dutch, or Italian. (All my interview participants were of Anglo-Celtic or European background.) As Beardsworth and Keil (1997) point out:

Of course, the role of food and food preparation conventions in symbolizing ethnic differences is [...] significant, given the fact that these conventions are such central features of cultural distinctiveness, and can retain their potency among minority groups for several generations after their physical separation from the parent culture. (53)

**5.10** Amongst my study participants, for instance, Pam, who had immigrated to South Australia from Ireland, described traditional Irish soda bread as a staple component of her everyday breakfast before she switched to the low-carbohydrate Dinosaur Diet four years ago (Mitchell & Mitchell 1999). As a long-term 'low-carber', soda bread was now a treat for special occasions only:

A typical [pre-diet] day [was] homemade bread, soda bread, which is an Irish sort of bread; bacon, eggs, sausages, mushrooms, all fried up in their juicy little fats. [...] I eat very, very little [bread now]. At Christmas I had soda bread. (Pam, 50s)

**5.11** Gina, a second-generation Italian Australian, also described how before going on a low-carbohydrate diet, foods such as pasta and bread had been taken for granted as daily staples:

I have since [going on the diet] tried to avoid breads, rices [*sic*], potatoes and pastas which is like, being European, it's like, no pasta, no bread, hardly any rice and no potatoes, it's like [...] well, I mean they were my four basic food groups. (Gina, 40s)

**5.12** Although pasta, bread, rice and potatoes are also staple foods for many (if not most) Australians, regardless of their background, Gina specifically associated these foods with her Italian heritage (she used the word 'European' frequently as an apparent euphemism for 'Italian'), and especially with her mother's cooking. Since switching to a low-carbohydrate diet five years ago, foods such as pasta had become treats which she now only has when her mother cooks something really special:

I don't really have pasta, I don't really miss it. But every now and then when, say, Mum



makes something like lasagne, home-made stuff which is like “Oh gee, it smells so nice”, I’ll have it [...]. (Gina, 40s)

**5.13** This passage is interesting because of its ambivalence. On the one hand, it is striking how easily Gina can say ‘I don’t really miss [pasta]’, given her earlier statement that it was one of her ‘four basic food groups’. On the other hand, the passage is dominated by an upsurge of nostalgic longing for ‘Mum’s lasagne’. This longing is mediated by the sense of smell, which along with taste is both at the forefront of our sensory experience of food, and pivotal in development and recall of memories. Notice that neither Gina nor Pam is willing to exclude pasta or bread *completely*, even though Gina, especially, defines her diet negatively via the exclusion of such foods. Rather, both women have renegotiated the place of these foods in their diet, transforming them from daily staples which were simply taken for granted, to ‘special occasion’ foods to be eaten only ‘every now and then’.

**5.14** Like Gina, Karen expressed a high degree of attachment to the starchy staples she had chosen to give up when she went on a low-carbohydrate diet, and associated this attachment with her cultural heritage. Karen described starchy foods like potatoes as being very important to her because of her Dutch background. This meant that she could not imagine sticking to a strict low-carbohydrate diet indefinitely:

*Karen:* When you’re doing a meal in the evening and you’ve got, you know, a steak and stuff, and you want your vegies with it, you know, we’re Australian, I’ve got Dutch background, which is “potatoes are our lives”, you know, and it is difficult to sit there and sort of say: “Well, I can have the broccoli and I can have the cauliflower, and I can stand that, but I’m not allowed to have the potato.”

*Interviewer:* So [...] you don’t see you could live the rest of your life and not have another piece of toast?

*Karen:* Oh absolutely not. [...] Potatoes are my life. (Karen, 30s)

**5.15** The conversation here involves a slippage between potatoes (to which Karen refers) and toast (in my response); in the context of low-carbohydrate dieting these two foods are metaphorically interchangeable. As does Gina, Karen associates a food which many Australians might consider unremarkable (the potato) with her personal Dutch heritage, although she slips between identifying herself as Australian and as Dutch. For Karen, potato clearly forms part of a fixed meat-and-three-veg meal pattern (steak / broccoli / cauliflower / potato). The subtraction of the potato from this equation represents a trauma to the pattern of the meal, as well as a rupture in the continuity of lifetime eating habits across generations.

**5.16** For Gina, a particular difficulty was the function of traditional Italian foods at extended family gatherings and celebrations. Gina described how her choice of diet initially bewildered her family, especially her mother:

You know, my Mum: “how can you not have pasta? I made it”. Especially the home-made stuff, it’s beautiful, it’s like, “oh, sorry Mum, but I can’t have any gnocchi that are full of potatoes and flour”. [...] She just couldn’t understand it; she thought I was nuts, actually [...]. Yeah, at first the extended family thought I was just a bit nuts. (Gina, 40s)

**5.17** Gina’s mother, as Gina reports it, interprets Gina’s refusal to eat gnocchi as a personal rejection (‘I made it’) and a rejection of the time, effort and care that has gone into the food’s preparation (‘I made it’). Gina’s mother is also bewildered by dietary rules which seem to her to be ‘nuts’: rules which exclude high-quality, tasty, home-made foods, and suggest that starchy foods might make one fat. As in the passage I analysed earlier from *South Beach*, there is a rather poignant sense of nostalgia that comes through here from Gina’s mother for a supposedly lost era of extended family food harmony – whether real or remembered. The implicit reasons for this loss in *South Beach* and in Gina’s account are superficially different, but in fact inextricably interlinked. On the one hand, *South Beach* blames the loss of shared family meals on post-industrial lifestyle changes. On the other hand, Gina has opted out of shared family meals due to her choice of a low-carbohydrate diet, which is itself (I would suggest) part of broader cultural responses to the post-industrial food system and the health issues it arguably causes. Thus what links *South Beach* and Gina’s account is not just nostalgia for a time before dieting, but nostalgia for a time when dieting was not necessary, when food and family were (supposedly) not in conflict.

**5.18** Gina described how she will occasionally eat home-made pasta at family gatherings for the sake of being part of family social activity. However, the standard of the food has to be worth the carbohydrate intake:

Coming from my family where, Europeans [...] you’re not sort of like socialising unless you are eating and partaking with everyone else [...]. With me being Italian there’s always going to be pasta so if it’s really nice I’ll join in, but if it’s just packet pasta, oh, I can leave that, that’s not a problem. But like, you know, if my Mum’s made lasagne as I said, you know, I’ll have to have some, or a cannelloni, I’ll have half, just to either join in but also I mean, you know, it’s nice [...]. (Gina, 40s)

**5.19** Gina describes the shared eating of traditional Italian pasta dishes, home-made by ‘Mum’, as a group activity which renews and maintains family ties. By ‘joining in’ (participating in the family meal) she renews and maintains her ties to the family group, and it seems that even a small serving will serve this purpose. On the other hand, ‘packet pasta’ will not promote family bonding to the same extent. (It is interesting to note, in contrast to *South Beach*’s nostalgic vision, that Gina’s mother does not always make pasta from scratch!) Rather, familial bonds are nourished by her mother’s high-quality, home-made pasta dishes, especially those (like lasagne and cannelloni) which are complicated and time-consuming to prepare.

**5.20** In other interviews, the participant’s mother did not appear to play such a central role in the

development of food memories, although Phil (50s), like Gina, explicitly associated his mother's diet (said to be high in cakes and other sweets) with her ill-health (high cholesterol and cancer). Interviewees sometimes mentioned their mothers' cooking during childhood in passing, but without particular remark. (One exception was Emma [30s], who dryly observed of her mother: 'I wouldn't say that cooking was her major forte so it's not as if I yearned to recreate the dishes that my mum made'.) Most often, interviewees mentioned either their mother or father in relation to memories of their parents dieting during the interviewee's childhood, as well as parents' current dieting behaviour – several dieters' parents had also tried a low-carbohydrate programme. In particular, three interviewees' mothers and two fathers were inspired by their children's dieting success to try a low-carbohydrate plan.

**5.21** Although dieters like Gina expressed their attachment to traditional high-carbohydrate staple foods, they had also come to perceive these foods as unhealthy within a low-carbohydrate nutritional paradigm. Most of the dieters whom I interviewed were therefore willing to restrict their intake of foods like pasta and potatoes very severely, although their relationship to these foods remained complex and highly ambivalent. For instance, Lisa, whose background was Dutch, indicated her willingness to sacrifice the foods with which she had grown up for the sake of the perceived health benefits of a low-carbohydrate diet:

I come from a European background where it is high-carbohydrate, you know, they sit down and tuck into toast and I think about some of the foods that are traditional in my family, it's so bad! [...] If you go to [the Netherlands], not so much now, they've probably changed their eating patterns now too, but if you sit down they will eat white rusks, and really high[-carbohydrate], really bad food. [...] I do love that old-fashioned, the way I was brought up, I do love that. But [...] I'm very funny about eating something that's not good for you. If I think it's not good for you I probably won't be eating it, only as a treat. (Lisa, 40s)

**5.22** Lisa suggests here that the traditional or 'old-fashioned' Dutch diet has likely been eroded in the Netherlands itself in favour of more healthful alternatives to the staple toast and white rusks she remembers from childhood. In this, her construction of authentic Dutch foodways as being 'on the way out' mirrors Agatston's claim that authentic Asian foodways are under threat from the industrial processing of rice in Asian cities. However, the crucial difference between Lisa's position and that of authors like Agatston is that Lisa most definitely does not perceive the 'old-fashioned', authentic Dutch diet as healthy within the low-carbohydrate paradigm: she describes traditional Dutch foods as 'really high[-carbohydrate], really bad food'. Of course, as Heldke reminds us, Dutch food would be deemed less 'ethnic' than the quintessentially ethnic cuisines of the Mediterranean, Middle East and Asia (Heldke 2003: 51). Nonetheless, Lisa's position is at odds with the attempts of diet authors to present a low-carbohydrate regime as a way to reclaim and reconnect with cultural tradition, whether Western or Other. Instead, Lisa represents low-carbohydrate dieting as a rejection of her family's Dutch culinary tradition, which she now views as intrinsically unhealthy.

**5.23** Similarly, Gina described how she has come to associate traditional Italian foods such as pasta with overweight and diabetes via the body of her mother:

I look at my Mum and I see her body shape [...] she's shaped like a barrel, honestly, and that's what I look at and I think: "if I don't be careful and look after myself now [...] I'm going to turn into her". [...] I see her and she's eating her pasta and her bread and [saying] "here, Gina, eat", and it's like, right, this is really good motivation, not to eat. (Gina, 40s)

**5.24** Gina's comments here tend to invite a psychological interpretation: Gina fears not looking like her mother but becoming her ('if I don't be careful [...] I'm going to *turn into her*'). The position Gina expresses, like that of Lisa, is seemingly at odds with the representation of healthy Italian and Mediterranean cuisines in *South Beach*, since Gina views Italian foodways as inherently unhealthy (although Agatston might argue that the meal patterns Gina describes are not 'authentic' since they take place outside Italy). However, Gina's representation here of the nexus mother / home / food also challenges Agatston's nostalgia for a lost sense of connection between body, food, family and community. To Gina, the mother / home / food nexus promotes overweight and diabetes, not the healthy diet and lifestyle habits that Agatston envisions as part of his domestic ideal. At the same time, I would be wary of reading Gina's dieting practice as a rejection of her Italian heritage. She continued to cook pasta and other Italian food for her husband and children, and constructed her own eating habits as 'different' even as she noted her family's acceptance of them:

They've got used to it and they don't have any issues with it. Like, you know, now if they sit down to a bowl of pasta and I will have, say, a salad or a quiche or something, it's like they don't even look twice, they don't think twice about that I eat differently [...]. (Gina, 40s)

**5.25** I would conclude that Gina's relationship with high-carbohydrate Italian foods remained complex and conflicted. On the one hand, Gina was willing largely to disconnect herself from her 'four basic food groups' for the sake of a relatively minor weight-loss (about five kilograms; she had never been much overweight). On the other hand, Gina accepted and perpetuated the importance of traditional Italian foods to her family through her own cooking and her occasional consumption of her mother's food. When I asked whether she would ever stop cooking pasta for her own children, the idea seemed literally inconceivable to her.

## Conclusion

**6.1** My interviews with low-carbohydrate dieters suggest that there is a disjuncture between low-carbohydrate textual discourse and dieting practice in relation to culinary nostalgia and tradition. Earlier in this paper, I outlined and critiqued the romanticisation of traditional, less industrialised foodways in the popular low-carbohydrate diet literature. The dual discursive turn to other times and other places is particularly pronounced in *South Beach*, but is also evident in other low-carbohydrate texts. When authors

like Agatston construct a binary opposition between the obesogenic modern American diet, and either the Western diet of decades past or the diet of an ethnic Other, generalisation and strategic idealisation tend to sideline factual and historical accuracy. Any diet or cuisine that is *not* modern and *not* Western must be made to fit the nutritional axioms of low-carbohydrate dieting. However, it requires extreme discursive manoeuvres to make processed foods whole and ethnic foods uniformly healthy. Dieters' lived experiences of 'low-carbing' reflect the practical demand to eliminate high-carbohydrate foods, which have been globally fundamental to diverse post-agricultural food traditions. The practical necessity of excluding staple starches tended to sever dieters from their own and Other culinary traditions, quite different from what low-carbohydrate authors would like to claim.

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## Acknowledgements

This research was carried out as part of a PhD project jointly supported by the University of Adelaide, South Australia, and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Human Nutrition Division. This article was revised as Policy Research Fellow at the ESRC Genomics Policy and Research Forum, University of Edinburgh. Heather Kerr and Carlene Wilson provided feedback on earlier versions of this paper and their advice is gratefully acknowledged, as are the detailed comments of the two anonymous reviewers.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The quotation in the title is from an interview with low-carbohydrate dieter 'Karen', discussed later in the article.

<sup>2</sup>I briefly discuss the same passage from *South Beach* in an essay for a general audience (Knight 2005: 48-9).

<sup>3</sup>For a fuller discussion focussing specifically on authenticity in low-carbohydrate diet discourse, see Knight (2006).

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