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THE RISE OF KETO MAN: THE MYTH OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY

GENEVIEVE WILSON

This paper examines how the keto (ketogenic) diet comes to meet the social and political needs and desires that go unmet in the context of neoliberalism. By tracking the ideology and rhetoric that emerges from personal anecdotes of people reliant on a meat based diet – with a specific focus to online platforms – I situate the diet as engaging with and reproducing a male chauvinistic ideology. I suggest that the person who finds themselves on keto wants to invest in themselves to contrast the anxiety and precarity that they face in a neoliberal society. I call this figure Keto Man.

Cet article examine comment le régime céto (cétogène) parvient à répondre aux besoins et désirs sociaux et politiques qui ne sont pas satisfaits dans le contexte du néolibéralisme. En suivant l'idéologie et la rhétorique qui émergent des anecdotes personnelles de personnes dépendantes d'un régime à base de viande - avec un accent particulier sur les plateformes en ligne - je situe le régime comme un engagement avec et une reproduction d'une idéologie chauvine masculine. Je suggère que la personne qui se retrouve sous céto veut s'investir en elle-même pour contraster l'anxiété et la précarité auxquelles elle est confrontée dans une société néolibérale. J'appelle cette figure Keto Man.

In an interview with Joe Rogan, Jordan Peterson relays his transition to a pure “carnivore diet” (Rogan 00:30). Peterson attributes his predominantly meat-based diet to resolving his bodily ailments and allowing him to go about his day “better now than [he’s] ever been in [his] life” (09:45), and, crucially, frames his diet as allowing him to become intellectually “his best” (11:08). This personal improvement experienced by Peterson allows him to feel he is perform-

ing his intellectual labour at peak productivity and also has the physical strength to care for his family. These characteristics are constituted and structured in the most fundamental way as the 1950s man—one that is part social fact and part fantasy where he believed himself respected and valued for his labour in both social and the economic sphere, as head of the household and breadwinner, who was rational, strong, and in control. In this respect, Peterson idealizes a return to the past which has ignored how 1950s men were enmeshed in networks of social security. Instead, Peterson seeks to return to these coded material realities where contemporary men are no longer victims to a precarious social reality that once preserved their existence. This figure of the contemporary man is presented against everyone else who Peterson calls “fat and stupid” (Rogan 12:47). This secondary category has been made weak and victim to a social reality which no longer preserves their existence. However, men who have accepted Peterson’s narrative and adopt his practices for themselves serve all the more as representations of a masculinity coded by the precarity of the socioeconomic landscape. Located at this intersection of transgressive culture and neoliberal precarity, I set out to track the emergence of a figure I call “Keto Man”.

Keto Man is a “type” in the same way that one identifies themselves as being “punk” or a “hippie”: they are sets of conformities that inform individual behaviour and practices under contemporary conditions (a “genre” of being). The anxiety of failing within the ideologically bound identity of Keto Man isolates him from becoming his most authentic self; this means that the Keto Man discourse is characterized internally by tensions, anxieties, and contradictions. The person who finds themselves on keto wants to invest in themselves to contrast the precarity that they face in a neoliberal society. They no longer want to find themselves victimized to the inauthentic lifestyle characterized by a feminine culture. Keto Man draws on ideas of caveman autonomy and primitiveness that free the individual from contemporary cultural constructions. As well, Keto Man draws on the hegemonic masculinity associated with the figure of *Superman*, situating the discourse as linked to patriarchal forms of power. To explore the identity of Keto Man in greater detail, I ex-

amine the Youtuber Aaron Marino, known on his channel as “AlphaM”. As an influencer, Marino outlines the practices and behaviours which make up his life and creates a cultural image that other men can identify with and mimic. The practices he promotes become identifiable with a particular genre of being: encompassing figures like Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, and Jacob Chansley (also known as the QAnon Shaman).

The materially real practice of a meat-based diet, for Keto Man, is used with the aim to reawaken fantasies which are deeply rooted in constructions of hegemonic masculinity. His identity is a set of pre-determined performances which even the working-class man feels he can relate to. On the bodily level, the dreams of recreating the strength of bodybuilding men are unattainable. But in the psyche, he reproduces images of power: over labour and over himself. This access to power, reinforced by keto discourse and culture, reinforces the belief Keto Man holds that he is a sovereign individual, where all values appear arbitrary in contrast to the immediacy of his desires. Yet keto is reproduced within contemporary food cultures like Instagram—a media ecology popularly known as “foodstagram”—not only as it offers itself as an extension of value of the individual, but, at the same time, becomes a form of currency being circulated in competition with others. As the individual shares images of their food, they aim not only to show the food’s quality but also suggest they are eating better than others. But more deeply connected to the individual’s identity is the adoption of a diet as it reflects meanings attached to foods often bordering on fully formed philosophy. The specificity of the discourse equates moral values, personal projects of health, and wider cultural beliefs. Keto, in this instance, emphasizes a narrative of personal strength.

It is precisely in this respect that this analysis of Keto Man is contextualized by the tradition of discourse analysis established by the Frankfurt School. Keto’s practices and discourse are a type of “text” reproducing ideological thought. This critique of Keto Man is a “project emerging out of a specific image of time. It is this that separates the project from critique envisioned as mere *disagreement*... [but] designates time as the point of contact between two (or more) states

of being ... [that] separates one future from another” (“Frankfurt” 7). A person on keto relates to, interprets, and acts within contemporary culture through the lens of the very specific and regimented ideology of keto. Here, keto frames itself as a solution to contemporary ails. Yet, beyond simply masking present social conditions (ideology as a false consciousness), keto points to a real critique within society. Keto’s rejection of carbs—processed breads and pastries that are draped in decadence and fantasies of luxury—still registers a real problem in capitalist economies: the motivation of profit incentivizes food culture that is unhealthy in its large quantities. This approach, one that looks at both the inner logic of an ideology and subtly or unknowingly critiques the present order, derives from Fredric Jameson’s conception of the political unconscious, which ultimately examines the embedded political context within a text. Though keto discourse acts as a utopian project of the self, aiming to separate itself from mainstream practices, it is both created from and unconsciously reproduces a capitalist system. Finally, I explore the discourse utilized by Keto Man through Roland Barthes use of semiotics.

What follows is a preliminary historicization of Keto Man. After unpacking the conditions which have brought about the emergence of Keto Man, I examine three distinct, yet interdependent forms of his identity. The first section presents a reading of the smart and savvy entrepreneur Keto Man imagines himself as within the neoliberal economy. This figure is grounded in a socioeconomic logic that maximizes productivity for its greatest return. In the second section, I examine how Keto Man frames his return to caveman practices as a restoration of what he believes makes up human essence. Finally, in the third section I confront the gendered nature of Keto Man; I examine his avowed return to traditional masculinity in contrast to the feminization of the world (and of men) he sees taking place. Tracked across all three sections are the relations of meat consumption to the configuration of stability characterized by Keto Man. This line of inquiry aims to examine how keto responds to gaps within contemporary culture that go unmet by present economic and social systems.

EMERGING FROM THE DISCOURSE

The keto diet is best understood through the primary consumption of animal-based protein and low-carb meals: classic meals like steak and potatoes are reimaged as complete with just steak. This combination is fantasized by many as a cure-all diet: from obesity to epilepsy to cancer (Wheless 4). The rhetoric of the keto (ketogenic) diet is mutually implicated in living a healthy life. But its success as a diet was based on producing physical results: its most compelling result remains rapid weight loss. This dieting subject wants to believe they have found a system in which they can establish a secure identity: one speaks of *being* keto rather than just being *on* the keto diet. While there is an established medical discourse surrounding the keto diet that legitimates its practices, I examine keto within the contemporary cultural context. Unlike the traditional understanding of keto which demands a strict and unwavering adherence—excluding pantry staples like breads and pastas, traditionally high in carbs, as well as vegetables and legumes—I broaden this working definition of keto to encompass variations of the diet like its more extreme version the carnivore diet and the paleo diet. Both streams reproduce the same narrative as keto through a focus on the naturalness of meat consumption but are narrated under a different name. Keto points towards a set of behaviours associated with copious consumption of meat. I suggest that the set of beliefs engendered by the keto discourse can be tracked against anyone’s overreliance on meat as a primary form of sustenance.

It is, then, keto’s restrictive habits which aim to define a person’s consumption around the needs of their individual body. On keto, the body is sent into ketosis, which is considered by its adherents the most productive, physical state. No longer burning excess carbs as a source of energy, the body targets fat. As fat is naturally produced in the body and found in sufficient quantities in meat, keto is framed as reacting to the body’s deepest and most primordial needs. The “good fats” from the meat are framed as powerful inducers to performance enhancement, with adherents to the diet claiming improved levels of energy, mental clarity, and developing otherwise unreachable levels

of strength.¹ Though its excessive consumption is traditionally linked to the fear of clogging one's arteries, meat is framed by those on keto as the primary cause of substantial personal transformation. This diet comes to be recognized, paradoxically, as a kind of cleanse. The body's shift into ketosis purges the inadequacy of carbs and rebuilds itself through the pure, naturalness of meat. This total body experience comes in the form of a "keto flu," a short-term sickness that commonly occurs in the shift of metabolic function. While its symptoms become comparable to weaning off of a drug addiction, the flu functions as a form of ritual rebirth with religious associations. Having passed through this rite, the body is now considered ready to face the harsh realities of neoliberal society. Keto is, thus, framed as a salvation – somewhere between diet and religion – that suggests it is capable of crafting one's body (and soul) into its most ideal form.

Keto Man maintains control over his consumption right from the beginning: earning the money to buy the cut of meat right through to its preparation. But whoever follows this diet in no way escapes the logic of the market. Jennfier M. Silva's text *Coming Up Short*—a sociology of working class peoples—explores people who have been unable to establish this security and become victims of the neoliberal system through economic precarity and a broad sense of purposelessness. Her text highlights how they first "experienced a steep decline in employment, job security, compensation, access to pensions, and employer-subsidized health insurance" and were displaced "to the service economy ... where [they are] poorly paid, vulnerable to layoffs, and much more likely to be female" (14-15). The neoliberal subject is "individually negotiated and continually reinvented" (19) in an often-futile attempt to determine one's social existence. As the working class male attempts to navigate the harsh realities of the neoliberal economy, he is often nostalgic for the idealized American Dream life of the 1950s and 1960s when the "welfare state ... guarantee[d] basic standards of living to all, and [directed] the economy towards socially desirable ends" (Gerbaudo 19). The neoliberal subject's nostalgia towards his parents' generation focuses on men as they were independent. These men were enmeshed in social networks of welfare state programs, allowing them to live more digni-

fied lives. They were not victims to the “coercion, restriction, and discrimination” (Silva 15) that presently plagues their existence.

The identity of Keto Man did not emerge solely as a response to the market conditions but, in part, arose as a reactionary movement to a growing feminist culture. At a time when the alt-right narrative was only beginning to gain mainstream traction, Donald Trump’s campaign and Presidency split the Republican party between those who “may eventually go down the road of outright fascism”, legitimating the movement and its concerns, and those who have a “greater resemblance to nineteenth-century rabid conservative nationalism” (Gerbaudo 28). These men who identify with the culturally transgressive movement—which is at the same time preoccupied with rebuilding a society based on white masculine ideals—follows from a long tradition of meninist discourse. Meninism is a male-chauvinistic discourse that emphasizes a perceived innate superiority and privilege of the male sex. Symbols of this meninist participation come from cultural touchstones like the film *Fight Club*. Men are depicted within the film as utilizing the rawness of their bodies for savage fighting against other men to demonstrate their strength and power. *Fight Club* is a reclamation of masculinity in a consumerist, post-industrial culture seen as having transformed men into lazy (feminized) office workers. This gendered essentialism calls for a return to traditional binary gender roles when men held absolute social power.

The meninist subcategory of the alt-right established itself within a new form of online society. The transgressive space that Keto Man participates in is outlined by Angela Nagle’s text *Kill All Normies* where she tracks how men utilize the alt-right narrative and rhetoric to offer themselves a greater sense of domination and power. These men move away from a society they see as perverted from its natural state of male superiority and long to reestablish society through a community of men who claim to see reality for what it truly is: a prison-like, feminized society. The meninist discourse attempts to reveal how sociocultural behaviours have become unfair for men as feminist practices are suggested to pervasively control individual actions. These men have constructed, in turn, a networked culture termed the “manosphere” (Nagle 86) which encourages men to utilize

a perceived intrinsic power to create a reality based around a desired sovereignty to become a “real man.” The power they conceive within this system is based on performing their masculinity for other men; they want to impress men on a near-homoerotic level where other men desire to be like them, in character and physicality. While men are simultaneously in competition against and empowered by other men to completely restore traditional codes of masculinity into their daily lives, they are driven by a social misandry to which they feel victimized against the feminist wave. This bitterness and resentment of their personal struggle fills these online spaces and creates subcultures that are free of the “feminized networks [as men actively and] aggressively seek to defend the[ir] borders” (Nagle 112).

In 2008, Aaron Marino uploaded his first men’s advice video to his *YouTube* channel “AlphaMConsulting.” His platform would become an empire that celebrated men “looking and feeling their best” (Marino “I Am Alpha M”) through fitness, eating for physical optimization, and behaving like an alpha male. Further, the transformation of diet and lifestyle would ensure that men attain sexual conquests and economic success. The content of the channel centres on demonstrating to others how to be a “real man.” Marino’s *YouTube* channel, presently, has traffic of over 1 billion views and over 6 million *YouTube* subscribers. Though influencers like Marino exist primarily in online spaces, social media has become a prominent way of meeting and engaging with others, opening avenues to transform their online beliefs into physical experiences and expectations. Populist figures like Trump have capitalized on these communities to promote his own agenda while continually being emboldened by the increasing number of his followers.

Marino’s behaviours can be read as reproducing a hegemonic masculine identity. As both an entrepreneur and fitness influencer, his identity is based on both a notion of individuality and reproducing a traditional image of masculinity. The hair products he sells and physical fitness routines he expounds contribute to ideas of physical optimization which construct notions of hegemonic masculinity. Further, Marino’s identity is based on his diet. Marino’s physique, a defined six pack and muscular arms that he brags about creating through his

diet, is interpreted as a sign of masculinity. R.W. Connell delineates this practice of reading the body as a text as body-reflexive practices, bodies as “both objects and agents of practice” (61). Marino’s diet is also linked to notions of rugged individualism and self-reliance which literally shape his body into a hyper-masculine appearance. Marino prioritizes protein consumption through meat and the exclusion of processed foods, but he frames these keto-like behaviors as self-customization, a narrative that will be examined in greater detail in the following sections. These dietary practices are described as exclusively suited to his body, yet when the diet is broken down it mimics the regimented keto diet. Like the broader influence network he is a part of, his success is based on being a reproducible figure. I suggest that Marino, but especially his AlphaM brand, while promoting a loose version of keto, is nevertheless a paradigmatic expression of the Keto Man narrative. In what follows, I examine how Marino’s diet and behaviours are constituted through “social relations and symbolism” (Connell 64) to form the social reality of Keto Man.

KETO MAN: “A VERY REGIMENTED DUDE”:² THE RATIONAL NEOLIBERAL SUBJECT

From William Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, the man who vows all parts of himself to institutions, using the language of individualism to “stave off the thought that he himself is in a collective” (5), to the contemporary apparatus of Silicon Valley and the entrepreneurs who imagine themselves as non-conformists and creating new practices, Keto Man idealizes the entrepreneur as the height of neoliberal success. The entrepreneur does not see his obedience to the neoliberal system as a form of control over him, but rather sees himself rising to the top and dominating the system itself. The entrepreneur “perform[s his] identity on the edge of convention” (“Sovereigns of Risk” 595), allowing him to push the acceptability of the system while still appearing bound by the neoliberal order. The entrepreneur works without questioning the legitimacy of the capitalist state. His ability to master the conditions of the neoliberal state for his own benefit frame him as the most worthy of success. Keto Man creates a distinction between the smartness of the entrepreneur

and the run-of-the-mill white-collar worker. A tension arises in the discourse as Keto Man rejects the capitalist participation of the white-collar worker. The white-collar worker is framed within the discourse as being no more than a cog in a machine: a faceless paper pusher. He is resented by Keto Man for reproducing an ostensibly stagnant life and allowing socioeconomic conditions to direct and shape him. He is nothing but an effect of a larger system: he lacks self-directedness and creativity. Although the entrepreneur often begins as a nerdy office worker, the white-collar labourer is regarded as being a lesser type of man until he discovers a niche product that drives him to fantastic success. Keto Man sees the entrepreneur's rise to the top as possible for anyone as he is not born into the entrepreneurial power, but rather must carve his own path.

The brutality of making it to the top of the economic system is less physical than it is an entrepreneurial drive to risk everything for innovation. Keto Man wants to be seen as equally a natural and powerful force within the knowledgeable, invisible hands of the market. What makes Keto Man's entrepreneurial drive so distinctive is his belief that a meat-induced power has procured his financial success rather than the mechanics of the market. Anything less than the high quality of the meat would devastate the performance of the entrepreneur. Thus, the average man believes himself also capable of attaining economic and social freedom through his consumption of meat. The economic independence necessary for Keto Man to be able to afford meat in such large quantities becomes analogous to gaining personal freedom. To be on such an expensive diet like keto would appear reserved for the upper working class, or middle-class citizens. Yet, it is often the working-class man who finds himself drawn to keto. As meat is targeted toward and consumed by "wealthy markets" (Otero 10), it becomes a part of a refined sense of taste and from here, offers the consumer symbolic capital. I suspect that the working-class male in these contexts desires to imitate the middle-class lifestyle promised by keto to reap its elevating social benefits. It is not just a promise to make one capable of appearing to be a part of the upper classes by augmenting the subject's appearance; the actual cost itself of being on keto suggests that the subject is already there.

It is through the self-disciplinary behaviors crafted through the restrictiveness of keto that Keto Man imagines meat as a form of rational individualized control within the neoliberal system. Yet, he remains fearful of being misperceived solely as a meathead. Contemporary culture defines the meathead as the guy who spends all day in the gym and does nothing but gorge on burgers. Thus, Keto Man actively seeks to expand his identity beyond just being perceived as simply healthy, strong, and physically attractive; he further imagines himself as resourceful, clever, and a successful neoliberal agent. He recognizes that *just* being physically fit is no longer a means to getting what he wants in this world. This reimagined self constructs his life through the controlled behaviours engendered by keto. It is through these behaviours that he sees himself as becoming prepared to face the unstable conditions of neoliberal reality. Keto Man mimics the productivity ketosis has on the body within his labour production. He aims to be constantly maximizing and expanding his output. His view towards constant production offers him status in return for his productivity. Adhering to regimented practices of keto is proof to others that he takes all aspects of his life seriously and applies to it the same level of control and rationality: he sees his own body as a factory in need of constant management and improvement in order to be made most efficient. Within the coordinates of this new imaginary, Keto Man takes a performative pleasure in rejecting the pre-made commercialized foods – foods that he often characterizes as carbs – that are sold in stores. He distinguishes his own dietary habits as superior and freer than those of the mass consumer; he is not captivated or enslaved by the addictiveness of eating cookies or breads, all things he has reduced to carbs. Carbs are framed within this narrative as irrational. They link the individual to consumerism for self-pleasure and stagnancy rather than active production. The individual is weighed down and kept from doing more than their menial, monotonous, and valueless labour.

Marino frames his weekly consumption of meat as providing him with a socially respected power. From Marino's meal preparation ("THE ULTIMATE 'ALPHA' DAILY ROUTINE" 05:14) to running a business (06:14), meat consumption is imagined as a tool of the al-

pha male: innately knowing how to utilize the system around him for his own advantage. He notably “stocks up” on meat from Costco (“What to Eat to Get LEAN” 00:51), a store exclusive to those who have the disposable income to pay for membership. For Marino, it is the thriftiness of these grocery trips which matter. The consumer is made to look disciplined in their shopping experience at Costco through their savviness in shopping in bulk to save money. He maintains this control beginning at work and earning money right through to buying the meat. The purchase of meat in transparent bags and free of branded packaging foregrounds the product itself as indicative of value: meat has symbolic value that does not need to be qualified by branding. It is the fuel that enhances and breeds a sly and fierce competitor that is like the “king of the jungle.” He feels as though he has greater purchasing power because even though he spent “a hundred and twenty-five bucks at Costco [he] got a month’s worth of chicken and salmon” (01:43 - 01:50). The transaction between Keto Man and private enterprise illustrates what neoliberals perceive as a mutually beneficial system. Thus, Keto Man aims to maintain the system for both his own liberation from the state, and in turn, to secure the self-governing system and practices which support the privatized businesses.

For Marino, the image of the entrepreneur—a ruggedly individualistic shark like Kevin O’Leary—takes on a life of grandeur. He narrates his life journey as one from bankruptcy to billionaire—having failed as a gym owner, Marino began his entrepreneurial journey creating the online business “AlphaMConsulting”—where he understands the conditions of the world through the market as both systems have grown and established themselves together. Having appeared twice on the television show *Shark Tank*, a show where aspiring entrepreneurs pitch their ideas to successful businessmen, Marino’s product receives validation from its appearance on network television for a clientele who legitimize his status as an entrepreneur. His ability to attain success and perceivably become a persona with the magnitude of Kevin O’Leary transforms Marino into a powerful individualistic figure. Marino identifies this persona as the “alpha” male. Marino equates the alpha to someone who is “capable and is going to kick ass



Figure 1

at life” (“10 Rules ‘ALPHA’ Males Follow that ‘BETA’ Males Don’t” 00:16-00:21).

IN THE RAW: PRIMITIVE AUTHENTICITY

Not until the dismantling of the welfare state and the subsequent need to fend for oneself would caveman imagery be used to express contemporary behaviours. Silva’s interviewee recounts entering a society he blames “for all our problems, and one thing [he] agrees with is that we have no coming-of-age rituals to dictate when we are a man... maybe a tribe back in the day would take you on a hunt and you might have a ritual combat” (50). The only semblance of a secure identity he is left with is that of the caveman. Keto Man calls to reawaken the caveman buried inside of himself. Though this lifestyle is popularized in the form of a caricature: sitting by *his own* fire and eating meat that he has hunted, *by himself*. Through this reanimation of the past, Keto Man believes himself to be returning to his natural essence. Human essence—for Keto Man a primitive authenticity—makes the claim that humans are innately primal beings. Fantasies of the caveman life are highlighted through

the adoption of self-sufficient behaviours that go beyond simply eating meat. According to Keto Man, one's essence has been interrupted amidst the perceived falsity and unnaturalness of cultural practices in contemporary society, contextualizing Keto Man's desire to return to a narrative of the Noble Savage. Ter Ellingson unpacks Rousseau's understanding of the savage as someone who may remain a "personification of natural goodness by a romantic glorification of savage life" and is idolized for living as an individual "in a 'pure state of nature' – gentle, wise, uncorrupted by the vices of civilization" (1). This state of being reaffirms conceptions of individual and self-sufficient survival as natural. The fantasy of sovereignty from the social state is established through his adherence to keto. The transition towards unobstructed "freedom" is characterized through animality and brute power as meat consumption leads to connotations of muscularity and invigorated masculinity.

The makeup of meat for the caveman is different than for the rational neoliberal subject: it has not yet undergone its transformation into a refined, scientifically validated diet. Rather, meat is primarily associated with the primal instinct of hunting for one's food. One is seen as having a "bull like strength" (Barthes 62) that can be imagined back to a primitive era where the caveman would rip meat with his teeth "in such a way as to make one keenly aware at the same time of its original strength and of its aptitude to flow into the very blood of man" (62). These cuts of meat—soaked with animal blood—are envisioned as a part of a "dense and vital fluid" (Barthes 58) that converts itself into a supplement that can aid the human body. This blood that is pumped into the body and circulates in the veins of the human is infused with the power of the animal. The joining of the animal and the human body heightens the natural animality that links the two species. This strength is transferred from the animal to the human through ideas of protein. When proteins are utilized within the terms of the discourse, they offer a mythical superstrength that repairs one's body and sustains its function. They target muscle growth, making the individual feel indestructible, and in a way, allow them to feel immortal. At the same time, the discourse positions carbs more generally as artificial and derivative when compared to

the naturalness of meat. The characterization of carbs is as the make-up of processed foods: foods that have been manufactured within an industrial system and have fundamentally altered their makeup. Within the conditions of the discourse, the weak and sluggish person who goes to the grocery store, where the work has already been done for them, becomes like the very carbs they eat puffy figures with little purpose. They have allowed themselves to be determined by the unnaturalness of carbs, a weakness that holds them victim to the equally unnatural construction of social democracy and culture.

An immense distance separates figures like weak betas from the icons of Keto Man. For figures like Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate, the desire to thrive as an alpha male—believing to live authentically in line with his deepest nature and uphold superior conditions of health and power—points towards the social Darwinist idea of survival of the fittest. Keto Man imagines having keto-enhanced abilities that support him as he moves to conquer the cruelty of life, a state of affairs he naturalizes rather than situates within a contemporary context built around neoliberal norms and practices. He sees his natural abilities and instincts as already “hardwired into [his] animalistic brain” (00:47-00:55 “7 PRIMAL Behaviors that ALL Men Must Embrace”). Marino plays out this narrative in his video “7 PRIMAL Behaviors that ALL Men Must Embrace,” emphasizing and prioritizing an indebtedness to primal caveman behaviours that he suggests have allowed him to take control of his life. For example, Marino frames making money as a modern-day equivalent to being “out on the hunt,” looking for gazelle’s and emus to bring home (03:11-03:22) for sustenance. Both practices sustain the individual as supposedly capable of self-sufficiency. Neither the caveman nor modern man is depicted as worried about their vulnerabilities amidst the precarities of the wilderness and market. They are, as Marino suggests, like the “king of the jungle, the big lion [who] walk[s] around with giant lion nuts [and not] walking around going oh sorry, I didn’t mean to be the *king of the freaking jungle*” (01:20-01:31, original emphasis).³ He posits the figure of the alpha as reflecting social dominance. Appearing as a legitimated power, Keto Man as an alpha rejects other au-



Figure 2

thority which tells him how to live. He is not to “doubt [his] ability” (A WARNING TO ALL (Modern) MEN, 00:13-00:14) to “be a leader.”

“AM I TOO MACHO?”: A RETURN TO AUTHENTIC MASCULINITY

The intensification of masculinity can be understood through its aim to restore a gendered essentialist view to the world. This form of masculinity, in other words, was once at the heart of social practices which no longer mediate one’s relationship to the world. The key means through which Keto Man reinscribes himself as a “man” is, first and foremost, bound up in traditionally masculine practices. But Keto Man can no longer trace his status within contemporary society, one which he perceives as increasingly feminine, as he believes his own intrinsic rights have been minimized. Rather, Keto Man’s origin of masculine power emerges from online communities where he is once again in a position “to take up space” (“10 Things that Make Men look FEMININE!” 02:29-02:31), as traditionally male conduct is reimagined as socially necessary practices. These online support systems become contemporary versions

of the “old boys club” where wealthy men would go to help other men both professionally and with personal problems. But the online networks are not exclusive to class – though their online access is in some ways exclusive and mediated by gatekeepers– nor are they filled with chatter regarding one’s financial security held around whisky and cigars. They are concerned with one’s perceived masculinity and how it is secured.

The key means through which Keto *Man* reaffirms his masculinity is through his drive for meat consumption as it offers him an unrefined strength and power within the terms of the discourse. It is, then, not only the artificiality of carbs which reinforce the idea of their deficiency when compared with the natural strength of meat, but also their inadequate nutrition. They are framed as creating a consumer who is both unhealthy and weak in contrast to Keto Man who sees himself as superhuman. Carbs are framed as lacking any valuable substance for the consumer who is then imagined as resembling this inefficiency within their own lives. Certainly, a rise in the notion of comfort foods—foods made largely of carbs and sugars like breads, pastas, and pastries—coincides with the rise of a culture that is perceived as female. The self-care narrative that is strongly linked to women emphasizes eating these comfort foods as an emotional support as they make an individual feel better about the present insecurities that they are facing. This weakened individual is understood within the terms of the discourse as susceptible to the addictiveness of carbs as they are reproduced by consumer markets that aim to trap consumers in a constant cycle of heedless consumption. From their initial doughy state to the fluffiness of pastries, carbs lack a spine (literally lacking the vertebrae of cows and pigs); rather, they are made up of such a vulnerable consistency that they have the potential to fall in on themselves, just as the consumer who eats bread is seen by Keto Man as powerless to their surroundings.

Marino notes in “HOW MASCULINE ARE YOU? (10 Signs You’re MORE Masculine Than You Think)” that “being a dude in today’s world is a little bit confusing, right, because masculinity is kinda like a dirty word; everybody’s yelling about toxic this, and masculine that, and you’re like woah, what should I do, am I too macho?” (00:34

-00:47). Today's man, Marino reassures his male viewers, is *born* to be perceived as "a masculine man" (01:00-01:02) and should be afforded the ability – despite a culture Keto Man recognizes as feminine – to perform traditional and dominant codes of masculinity. Commenters on Marino's channel, for example, look to implement the fantasy of male dominance into their daily lives beyond their online haven. After Marino's video "9 'NICE GUY' Mistakes DESTROYING YOUR LIFE" was posted, commenters sought further advice on how to build bonds with men and exclude women from their social circles – as talking to women was not a "look" they wanted amidst a culture seen as already feminized. Commented responses included going to the gym or joining the army as a means of reaffirming their masculinity. While these men sought communities of men to affirm their masculinity, these subcultures dominated by men utilize discourses of masculinity to regain a semblance of social control lost amidst contemporary society.

The last key element in Keto Man's show of dominance is his ability to control women. He has been taught this trade from incel subculture which "tend[s] to read like a sinister Darwinst guide" (Nagle 88-89) on enhancing his sexual dominance. The hunt for women is a game Keto Man learns at a young age. Keto Man tracks the "loathed female prey into surrender[ing]" (Nagle 88-89). Here, hunting as a motif is used as it connects Keto Man's masculinity to the primal, animalistic behaviours and imagery discussed in the last section. For Keto Man, this is a game he knows he can win. He practices these behaviours in spaces like Tinder that become a hub for men to swipe right on women until they get the perfect "spicy ass seniorita on [their] junk" ("Make A Woman WANT You MORE Than A Friend!" 00:04-00:06). While dating and hook-up apps have made it easy to access sexual gratification, Keto Man wants to be more than just a "player" but have women "obsess over [his] sexy ass" ("Make A Woman OBSESS Over You" 00:13 - 00:15). Keto Man will repeatedly use what Marino refers to as "psychological tricks" to gain control over women: Marino suggests that asking women about things she is passionate about will "automatically ... make her start to think about you in a more passionate and exciting way" ("Make A Woman

WANT 02:06- 02:12) as Keto Man and her passion become seemingly intertwined to become one and the same. It is in this haze of lust that Keto Man pounces on his prey (the woman) with the same desire as the primal self does over the meat he sees as hunted for personal satisfaction.

Where Marino's brand "AlphaM" actively seeks to recast him outside of contemporary, feminized networks, and in doing so, attempts to frame it through traditional male practices and behaviours, Marino's videos remain grounded in the rhetoric utilized by present feminine, society. This tension is evident as Marino talks about "grooming" himself via his own line of skin and hair care: born out of a rejection of mainstream products while recognizing the social benefits of being well kept. Marino's aim is to frame this line of beauty care as something men both "need and love" ("Alpha M. / Pete & Pedro – Shark Tank" 02:59) by taking it out of a feminized practice of beauty products and framing it as a step of becoming the king of the jungle. He equates the idea of grooming as being larger than the simplicity of vanity which he believes is the cycle in which women are caught (though, that is exactly what this is for men too) but suggests having clean hair makes you competitive against other men both as they attract women and are perceived as more manly. In the same capacity, the keto diet, though framed as aggressively masculine is similarly embedded with feminized cultural codes. The *diet* within contemporary society is often linked with the thinning of women's bodies: reaching a social ideal through regimented foods and exercise routines. Though Keto Man denies any objective of complying with social codes or expectations he strives to meet the physical standards of a "perfect" body. Keto Man's performances are developed out of a so-called feminine presence.

CONCLUSION

Anything beyond what Keto Man views as conducive to his world view is considered to be false. These personal interests are at the heart of how Keto Man allows privatized experiences to define his sense of self. The world of Keto Man—more

frequently in the form of online networks—functions as a personalized utopia. One key factor here is that the system Keto Man created and formed online fills in gaps in mainstream culture. These two worlds are no longer distinguishable for Keto Man; he desires to participate in the social reality to the same extent that he does in his online haven. The “populist’s rights departure from... social and cultural issues” is “ultimately just a contemporary recrudescence of fascism” (Gerbaudo 27). Suggestions of Donald Trump’s supreme authority – through his appointment of what were seen as unquestioning federal and Supreme Court judges – have peppered commentaries of him as the ultimate power. Men have felt emboldened by Trump’s rhetoric to reproduce similar systems of dictatorial power. The January 6 Capitol riot incited by Trump, bringing together a “militia [which] seemed to confirm the worst fears about a new fascism” (28), validates Keto Man’s own desires to radicalize his own discourse. Here, the Keto Man discourse springs into motion. Nagle points to men like Elliot Rodger, who after posting online his intention of shooting women inside a sorority house in California as compensation for still being a virgin (98-99), was depicted as a “God” as noted in a commenter’s username “ElliotRodgerIsAGod”. The performance of authority, over both his personal actions and social space, reveals Keto Man as someone who believes himself as having a natural right to power.

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IMAGE NOTES

- Figure 1: Screenshot of Aaron Marino pitching to investors on Shark Tank from Stover, Logan. "Alpha M. / Pete & Pedro - Shark Tank S07XE29 Season Finale (FULL SEGMENT) (FULL HD) [Fixed Audio]", *YouTube*, 27 Aug. 2018.
- Figure 2: Marino, Aaron. "7 PRIMAL Behaviors That ALL Men Must Embrace!". "AlphaMConsulting" *YouTube*. 13 Dec. 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmuoOIGLgSY>

NOTES

1. In Gary Taubes' book *The Case for Keto*, Taubes advocates that keto is the *most* effective diet based on *his* personal satisfaction with the results and further, the *only* way to live a healthy lifestyle.↔
2. Marino, Aaron. "THE ULTIMATE "ALPHA" DAILY ROUTINE (Men's Lifestyle & Productivity Tips) 24 Hour VLOG". "AlphaMConsulting". *Youtube*. 12 May 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN-jPR81n6zk> 00:38.↔
3. Note Figure 2, Marino acts out grabbing his "lion balls".↔