



# Grooving in the ludic foodscape: Bridled revelry in collegiate tailgating

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## Abstract

Throughout North America, the open air public feasting and drinking that surrounds an athletic event, most commonly football, is labeled “tailgating.” In this article, we explore how consumers infuse their place-creating activity with a well-modulated aura of revelry that energizes tailgating without jeopardizing either its immediate or long-term viability. To an appreciable degree, tailgating is about celebrating and preserving the communal bond enkindled in the primal hearth. We characterize tailgating as a “ludic foodscape” in an attempt to capture the kinetic, multisensory backdrop and atmosphere of playful consumer creativity against which the revelry of feasting and drinking unfolds. Our study is located at the intersection of inquiries into foodscapes, brandscapes, and landscapes. Among the interpretive themes emerging from our ethnographic analysis, we have implicated three in particular in the generation and modulation of the revelry that distinguishes tailgating from some of its more bacchanalian cousins: cuisine, carnivalesque, and canalization. These themes can be understood as social regulators that literally govern tailgating, endowing it with just the right amount of license to give it a festive edge without resulting in too disruptive or dysfunctional an atmosphere. We unpack the three cogs in this mechanism and analyze their relevance to the atmosphere pervading the sites of tailgating.

## Keywords

Tailgating, foodscape, carnivalesque, canalization, consumption

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Imagine the following scene, excerpted from our field notes, which occurs in November on a cold rain swept parking lot before the last home game of a college football season:

For thirty years, Mike has been tailgating here at the university, and he is proud to have missed just a few games, even during his military service. One of his favorite tailgates takes place at the final home game, when he supervises the cooking of a communal pot of chili. Many of his guests bring a container of chili (this year, 12 households contributed), which is emptied into a common pot. There are simple ground rules governing the preparation: the chili must be homemade, it can contain neither noodles nor rice, and it cannot be “too” spicy. Everyone at the tailgate eagerly anticipates new taste additions to old favorites, as the portions are combined, shared, and washed down with copious amounts of alcohol.

Sometimes guests go to heroic lengths to meet their obligation. For example, this season, a pair of “regulars,” an out-of-town couple that unfailingly brings chili, wound up in a hotel room that was not equipped with a stove. These guests managed to prepare their ingredients over a propane burner in their hotel room, to insure that their chili contribution would be ready. Like earlier memorable events (including the final-game chili ritual itself) recast as tribal lore, this incident seems destined for enshrinement in narrative, to be recounted at future gatherings.

As host, Mike has fashioned a burner from a beer keg that can accommodate the large pot which holds the combined chili. Guests present their chili almost ceremonially to Mike, who offers them a formal welcome greeting in return. It is Mike’s duty to add each contribution to the pot. He also adds huge hot peppers to the pot, to unify the flavors of the different chili recipes. The simmering meal is ladled out to diners, and consumed against a backdrop of conversation and banter. At the end of the feast, Mike always takes some chili home and freezes it, to become the starter for next year’s pot. He likes to quip, “You know there is a 30 year old bean in this pot somewhere!”

The vignette succinctly reflects some of the principal leitmotifs of the American collegiate institution of tailgating, the festive underpinning of which we explore in our ethnographic account.

This vignette captures issues of longevity and loyalty, of pilgrimage and homecoming, and of commitment to community bordering on the tribal. Furthermore, ceremony, ritual, and symbolism intertwine in this observation. In anticipation of their post-season dispersion, Mike offers a culinary valediction to his fictive kin, who are heartened by this corporeal reminder of their eventual reunion in the coming fall. Literally and figuratively, hosts and guests embody their past and their future in this departure meal. The interplay between hospitality and mutual aid, and of the rituals of radical inclusion that characterize the tailgate, highlights the do-it-yourself ethos of the phenomenon. Here, we expound upon these notions

by examining the generation of revelry in tailgating and some of the social regulators that govern it.

Vestaval, a placeway ritual that celebrates home in public space (Bradford and Sherry, 2015), generally includes food and quite often feasting. The binding power of feasting, and, in particular, of meals enhanced by alcohol, is apparent in the vignette. In this vignette, we can discern the parable of the postmodern pepperpot (a contemporary version of an aboriginal cooking practice that emphasizes continuity and contribution), that fairly resonates with allusions to such humanizing precedents as the gift of starter dough and the theft of fire. To an appreciable degree, tailgating is about celebrating and preserving the communal bond enkindled in the primal hearth. In the balance of this article, we amplify these notions through informant accounts gathered in our ethnography.

Throughout North America, the open air public feasting and drinking surrounding an athletic event, most commonly football, is labeled “tailgating.” In its original incarnation, a “tailgate” was simply a barrier at the back of a conveyance that could be released or secured to make the stocking and removing of cargo more convenient. If hinged, the barrier could substitute for a bench, or even a table, making improvisational meal space available. The term eventually generalized to boot lids and back doors, and finally to the back end of the vehicle. Tailgating is now employed metonymically to describe the entire celebration that is orchestrated from behind a vehicle.

Our study of tailgating is located at the intersection of inquiries into foodscapes, brandscapes, and landscapes. Hewer and Brownlie (2013) have charted the rising social scientific interest in culinary culture. The strong tie between foodways and both sense of home (Caldwell, 2004) and communal identity of familial cast (McCabe and Malefyt, 2013; Moiso et al. 2004) is well established. The tribal character of our informants’ foodways exhibits some of the same resistance that distinguished the early stages of the slow food movement (Sassatelli and Davolio, 2010). And, as with other public parties (Jennings and Brace-Govan, 2014), values are enacted through our participants’ playful feasting.

The tension between the individual autonomy of fandom and the corporate structuring of brandom (Guschwan, 2012) is performed by our informants, who create a fan/brand community hybrid of sorts of remarkable solidarity under light guidance from the “firm.” The utopian discourse of family and community articulated by tailgaters indicates both resistance to, if not rejection of existing ways of performing public place and engaging with spectacle, and a belief that others are possible (Bossy, 2014). The “spaces of consumption” that tailgaters literally construct from the ground up differ from those of ethnographic record (Miles, 2012) in a number of regards, with the ethos of prosumption being palpable. This self-directedness promotes an alternative, activist vision of citizenship (Bradford and Sherry, 2015) abetted by consumption and sharing. Sometimes, our lots and fields become an urban tourist destination (Gotham, 2007), but they are neither an urban nor commercial brand per se (Bookman, 2013).

Recent analyses in spatial consumption have focused on the way that domestic (or hestial) place has been employed by consumers to engulf public (or hermetic) space to create public place. Sherry et al. (2001) have analyzed the architectural dimensions of hestial dwelling – the built environment of a flagship brand store – presented by marketers to consumers as an inducement to co-create an intimate sense of place in public space. Bradford and Sherry (2015) have theorized the eversion mechanism of the place ritual they call “vestaval” that encourages the domestication of public space. In this article, we explore how consumers infuse their hestial place-creating activity with a well-modulated aura of revelry that energizes tailgating without jeopardizing either its immediate or long-term viability.

Here is our roadmap. We begin with a review of the literature related to place-way rituals. Then, we present our methods. To contextualize this phenomenon, we provide an overview and specify the focus of the study. Next, we present the emergent findings and close with a discussion of contributions.

## **Tailgating in social scientific research**

Consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) has long focused on the efficacy of consumption rituals, and we build on this tradition in our study. In his preliminary modeling and call for measurement of the relationship between consumer loyalty and ritualistic consumption in a sporting context, Neale (2010) characterizes tailgating as a fan ritual in need of investigation (although, reductively, merely in the service of construct scaling) as it is likely conducted by individuals of high behavioral and attitudinal allegiance. He advocates a two-dimensional approach (personal and social) to inquiry in order to accommodate the conceptual complexity of ritual. We accept his challenge as we unpack some of the dynamics of this ritual complex as they bear upon the preservation and continuity of amity in the potentially volatile context of tailgating. As space is acquired, transformed, defended, and surrendered in an atmosphere of rivalrous license, we explore how some ritual governor might act to preserve the peace.

Tailgating has a somewhat discontinuous history in social scientific research. Tailgating has been represented primarily as raucous partying in university parking lots, principally in blogs and popular or how-to accounts, and more exceptionally in journalistic treatments such as the Crimson Tide love letter penned by St. John (2005). Scholarly interest has focused largely on the correlation of alcohol consumption and automobile accidents, even in the consumer research literature (Wood et al., 2011), until recently. Where alcohol consumption is part of our inquiry, we seek to understand its role in tailgating as a placeway ritual versus alcohol as a proximate cause. Following the ongoing “spatial turn” in consumer culture theory, Bradford and Sherry (2015) characterize tailgating as spectacle-resisting emplacement ritual that transforms public space to public place by suspending temporarily the relations of market and polity that govern everyday life. Attending to regional variation, Newman (2011) interprets tailgating at Ole

Miss as a metasocial commentary on southern racial politics. The Grove Society tailgate is characterized as a “spurious tentscape,” although the author allows that “not all spectators . . . encounter . . . [this] spectacle . . . in the same way” (Newman, 2010: 264, 281). We agree that the phenomenon of tailgating permits, and likely demands, alternative interpretations, such as the vestavall-centered reading we advance in our analysis. Drenten et al. (2009) analyze the marketing implications of fans’ ritual commitment to and participation in tailgating. While the festive character of tailgating has long been recognized (Stamps and Arnould, 1998), the self-regulating mechanics of that festivity have gone undescribed.

Most studies of tailgating to date employ instrumentation that slights or ignores altogether the folk phenomenology of the event. For example, questionnaires administered orally to samples of University of Illinois tailgaters in a two-stage study examine the demographics, frequency, and persistence of tailgating, as well as motives for participating. Fans see tailgating as a chance to escape from everyday life, spend time with friends and family, and enjoy food and beverage; they largely understand football and tailgating as integrally intertwined (James et al., 2001). In his unpublished Master’s thesis on fan satisfaction with game day experience, based on Internet survey data from a predominantly single athletic conference sample and driven by forced choice response to researcher-specified experience dimensions, Nemeč (2011) finds positive and significant correlations between tailgating and overall game day experience, between tailgating and overall satisfaction, between overall game day experience and overall satisfaction, and between overall satisfaction and future behavioral intention. No sense of fans’ lived experience of tailgating or of the dynamics of the phenomenon itself is provided in the study. Similarly, a survey of a convenience sample of American Arena Football fans suggests that reasons for becoming a sports fan and sport fan team identification are strongly correlated with tailgating (Greenwood et al., 2006), prompting the authors to call for more research into tailgating, which they believe has played a major role in the rise of popularity of football in America.

In an ethnographic context that appears to share some of the spatial and festal characteristics of tailgating, although more so the venues of trade fair and bazaar, Newman and Giardina (2008, 2011) deliver a scalding criticism of the “consumer-based expression and market-oriented extension of . . . White paranoia” that they find the “sporting corporatism” of National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) to be (p. 75). Their critique of the culture industry’s collusion in the regressive identity politics of the neocon–neoliberal era focuses on NASCAR as a vehicle of Southern White masculinity, a “spectacle ‘of racial’ privilege,” “supremacy,” and “hegemonic patriarchy” (Newman and Giardina, 2008: 482). While Newman and Giardina (2011) report having “tailgated with NASCAR ‘die-hards,’” theirs is an etic perspective illustrated by the occasional field note, with little interview data adduced to convey the lived experience of fandom (p. 10). Allusions to “commercial villages” and “utopian communal space” (Newman and Giardina, 2011: 79) are intriguing, but the voice of the customer – a principal conveyor of tailgater experience – is largely silent. Their focus is on a critique of the

“carnival of capital” (Newman and Giardina, 2011: 10) rather than on the dynamics of tailgating. Elsewhere (Bradford and Sherry, 2015), we have contrasted the passive nature of participation in spectacle with the active, co-creative nature of participation in vestaval, of which tailgating is a genre, and shown the identity politics of the latter to be reconciliatory rather than embattled. Occasions of conflict are not removed, but rather negotiated. Tailgating promotes an integrated notion of community broadly construed, especially in its spatial practices.

Perhaps of greatest relevance to our present effort is Veri and Liberti’s (2013) exploration of four episodes of *Tailgate Warriors*, a cable television program hosted by celebrity chef Guy Fieri. While treating tailgating itself in glancing fashion, the authors focus on the staging of competitive cooking (and such dynamics as masculinity and terroir) in their analysis. We use cooking broadly construed, which plays a central role in this ritual complex, as a key to understanding the essence and longevity of tailgating.

## Methodology

Employing the standard methods of ethnographic team research (Sherry, 2006), including participant observation, interview, photography and videography, auto-driving, and member checking, we immersed ourselves in four seasons’ worth of tailgating at a private Midwestern Christian college we identify by the pseudonym Blackthorn University. This entailed intensive work at 25 home games, numerous away games, and, as a comparative check, a number of games unassociated in any manner with Blackthorn. We interacted in person and via social media with informants not only during the active tailgating season but also during the off season, when reminiscing and planning practices were in full swing. Data were collected until saturation was attained as determined by redundancy across insights (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We used projective tasking (autodriving) to determine whether we had reached the limit of our collective ability to elicit additional insights.

We chose Blackthorn as a focal site for opportunistic and strategic reasons. Its proximity made it convenient for the prolonged field immersion and follow-up with stakeholders the research team required to produce a nuanced interpretation. Its historic tradition as a football power coupled with its independent status gave the research team access to highly identified fans (Neale, 2010) and foes of national rather than merely regional provenance, deepening the intensity of consumer connection (or aversion) and widening the variance of ideologies and practices available for scrutiny. The popularity of Blackthorn tailgating spawned emulative, trickle-down variants at the regional high school level, making it interesting and convenient enough for researchers to explore for comparative purposes. While very limited tailgating may be observed at some other Blackthorn sporting events, we found it sporadic enough to exclude from our study, as the phenomenon overwhelmingly coincided with football season.

We trained field assistants (in prior pilot projects of almost 2-month duration) to aid us in data gathering as well as preliminary analysis to insure that we would

achieve both broad coverage and a diversity of perspectives in terms of generation, ethnicity, and gender. Assistants ranged from three to seven in number over the course of the study and turned over annually. The team convened weekly to exchange data; we conducted periodic strategy meetings to analyze current data and adapt the emergent research design as needed.

Researchers employed both temporal/processual and spatial perspectives throughout the study, tracking the ritual from start to finish at macro- and micro-levels and capturing the practices and ideologies attending the colonization, transformation, and creation of place. “Time” and “space” as observational frames were determined both emically and etically. For example, researchers observed what appeared to be domestic partitioning across a host of encampments and captured the insight in field notes, while informants’ references to places within their encampment as “kitchens,” “dining rooms,” “dens,” “family rooms,” “bars,” and “patios,” for example, were probed in interviews.

Working alternately as individuals, pairs, and trios so as not to overwhelm any particular microsite, researchers initially immersed themselves in as many aspects of tailgaters’ experiences as they were able to identify. We gradually narrowed and deepened our focus over the years, as salient themes emerged, in keeping with conventional ethnographic practice. As each season progressed, we circled back continuously to established informants while continually developing new prospects, providing both a synchronic and diachronic perspective of tailgaters’ worlds.

Between games and seasons, social media helped us cement many of these relationships by giving us insight into the planning, coordinating, and evaluating processes that underlie the game day events themselves. Real-time posts and phone calls often enabled us to capture important ephemeral events. Finally, team members were allowed to assist with many informants’ tailgates from set-up to tear down, deepening the relationships and degree of access with participants.

We varied our sampling frames – snowball, opportunistic, critical case, criterion, and others – over time (Miles and Huberman, 1984), followed a progressive coding strategy (Strauss and Corbin’s, 1998), and jointly negotiated our interpretation. To generate a synthetic understanding of the phenomenon, the authors integrated analyses over years and across research teams. Despite its overwhelming association with football in the American context, the researchers recognize that tailgating occurs at other sporting events, as well as at some concert venues, where variation in practices and ideologies is bound to occur. We trust that by laying out baseline analyses of the dominant genre, a platform can be established for comparative investigations of tailgating’s other manifestations.

As the hallmark of long-term ethnographic team research is a series of cognate journal papers that seeks to interpret a phenomenon comprehensively (Sherry, 2006), our account of tailgating is necessarily parsed over multiple venues. Our present account is focused solely on the mechanism that bridles revelry in a way that helps tailgaters pacifically enjoy an experience that might otherwise spiral out of control.



## **Tailgating in the Blackthorn context**

We refer to the parties thrown by individuals in lots surrounding the stadium and in outlying fields collectively as consumer tailgating. This revelry is the populist base of the phenomenon. Encampment space, in the form of parking stalls and access to bathrooms on campus, is rented from the university. Scalpers (opportunistic resellers) may command prices 10 times the face value of a permit, often much greater than that of scalped game tickets themselves. This differential hints at the importance of tailgating to the overall game day experience.

While we focus on consumer tailgating, tailgating experiences range from those within the home with invited guests to those that are retail enterprises welcoming the general public. Activities at each of these sites may give rise to the same feeling of *communitas* among informants as can be found among more do-it-yourself organic variants of the tailgate, even if the burden of hosting is monetized and outsourced. Residential tailgating is a variation of consumer tailgating, with parties being held in homes and yards, with close proximity to the actual sporting of no concern. Catered tailgating refers to the parties hosted in the lots and fields by individuals who have hired entrepreneurs to provide the entire entertainment infrastructure. Caterers buy food, beverages, and supplies, cook meals and serve drinks, and both set up and tear down the tailgate, leaving the host free to mingle with guests throughout the event.

Institutional tailgating refers to parties sponsored by the university, which include concession stands run by residence halls and designated local organizations, and the Hospitality Village of big-tent parties hosted by local and national firms as well as the university. This type of tailgating is overtly commercial, with the controlled access Hospitality Village being both expensive and exclusive. Retail tailgating refers to the parties hosted on the premises of local merchants, whose shops border the campus and who are able to use the game day festivity to drive traffic through their stores.

A species of retail tailgating bleeds into consumer tailgating, as businesses will sometimes acquire space in the stadium lots and adjacent fields and invite clients to attend parties hosted amid the populist base to have “the real” tailgate experience. Sometimes gatherings are staged as tailgates by entrepreneurs explicitly seeking to turn a profit, by charging their clients a fee for catered services. These places typically resemble such commercial venues as restaurants, cafeterias, bars, nightclubs, dance floors, and cinemas.

There are three principal zones of tailgating, each with its own microzones of activity, comprising the game day experience. The core campus zone includes the lots surrounding the stadium and the concession stands in the interior. The peripheral campus zone includes the distant fields and golf course links that handle non-reserved parking. The private corridor zone is a long strip of yards and lots not owned by the university, on the eastern edge of the campus. Each of these zones has a distinctive character, which we summarize briefly below.

The core zone is the site of greatest population density and most frenetic activity. It is somewhat of an impacted habitat. It is the most expensive of the two



campus zones in which to rent space and more highly regulated. Given the wide discretion that law enforcement is accorded in keeping the peace – informal dispute resolution and gentle persuasion appear to be the norm – the formal rules of tailgating are more rigidly enforced in this zone. Its proximity to the stadium results in more foot traffic than the other zones and provides more of an opportunity for tourism. Vigilant fans are frequently rewarded with sightings of sports heroes and media celebrities, who are often generous with their time and attention. Many tailgaters have stories of eating or drinking with the stars.

The peripheral zone has a lower population density, although its smaller number of consumers exhibits greater social heterogeneity and may be spread over more surface area than in the core zone. Lower cost and looser regulation on the periphery have caused some defection from the core zone by consumers, some of whom imagine themselves to be preserving traditions of “old school” tailgating. At one peripheral zone, Farr Field, social class differences are perhaps most pronounced. Here, the atmosphere may be a bit more unbridled, and consumer activity (e.g. games, live DJing, and dancing) is often spread across wider expanses of territory. Dance parties, firm-sponsored convocations of employees and clients, and touch football games between rival fans are not uncommon on the grass lots. There are isolated pockets of tranquility in this field, but the site largely resembles a confederacy of family picnics, with plenty of room for activities, and the recreational vehicles (RVs) that anchor them. Tailgates on another peripheral zone, the golf course, appear to be considerably more sedate, with something of a country club aura. Population density and playful activity (with the exception of pickup football games that require moving bodies and ample real estate) are at their lowest levels on the links, and there seems to be little need for rules or their enforcement among this stolid populace.

The private corridor zone is a variegated hybrid of the other two sites. Vehicular diversity is greatest here, as is the specialized material culture of tailgating. Space is at a premium here, so tightly packed clusters of encampments often make good use of the interiors of RVs and buses and, occasionally, their rooftops. Encampments blend into one another, creating more fluid boundaries than in the other zones. Pedestrians streaming down the thoroughfare enroute to the stadium may wander through these encampments, enthralled by the ingenuity of the built environments, and end up as guests in the course of the walkabout. Tailgates in this zone may resemble nightclubs, *al fresco* dining facilities, and multi-media entertainment centers, complete with huge flat screens, comfortable leather furniture, and even popcorn machines. Parties in this zone continue long after the 3-hour postgame limit enforced in the university lots, with some consumers huddled around campfires or bundled into buses well into the night.

No matter the zone occupied, the aroma of grilled meat wafts through the aisles and the smell of sunscreen shielding strollers conjure images of a day at the beach. Tailgaters taste a variety of regional and local dishes on their sojourn, with errant plumes of grill smoke providing vicarious samples of flavor on the breeze. Convenience and tradition decree a plethora of finger foods, sandwiches, and

other hand-held delicacies, facilitating the stickiness, spillage, and soiling that mark the further embodying of the feast. Makeshift seating arrangements ensure that laps are warmed by heaping paper plates, and can cozy shortages promote cold hands. Buskers ply the aisles and margins of the event. Games abound throughout the grounds. The crush of revelers requires occasional fancy dancing to negotiate the press. The seemingly ceaseless circulation of guests confers a general aura of movement upon the event, and the sound of laughter pervades the lots and fields. The festive playfulness of the tailgate is apparent to all its participants.

We term our field site a “ludic foodscape” in an attempt to characterize the kinetic, multisensory backdrop and atmosphere of playful consumer creativity against which the revelry of tailgate feasting and drinking unfolds. Thousands of cooking performances and presentations are staged in plain sight. The sound of sizzling grills and cracking beverage lids comprises the signature motif of the event through which is interwoven a cacophony of music, a thrum of conversation, a blare of broadcast games, and a parade of colorful images across the field of vision.

### **The Bridling of revelry**

We have implicated three interpretive themes emerging from our analysis in the generation and modulation of the revelry that distinguishes the ritual of vestavial from some of its more bacchanalian cousins: cuisine, carnivalesque, and canalization. These themes can be understood as social regulators that literally govern tailgating, endowing it with just the right amount of license to give it a festive edge without resulting in too disruptive or dysfunctional atmosphere. That the event unfolds outdoors, that neighbors without walls dwell in close proximity to one another, and that participants enjoy an option to roam if not always to sprawl, all likely act collectively as a damper on disruptive behavior. Close quarters do not produce the same sense of confinement or pressure cooker buildup of emotion as might an indoor venue. Imagining the ritual to have a communal governor allows participants to orchestrate an environment that shapes acting out behaviors in prosocial directions in a way that allows consumers to experience disinhibition within the bounds of propriety broadly construed. This governor mechanism creates a contained sense of tailgating as an experience of disorder within limits that contrasts with the corporate- or military-like control and precision on display in the stadium. We unpack the three cogs in this mechanism – cuisine, carnivalesque, and canalization – and analyze their relevance to the atmosphere in the lots and fields.

#### *Cuisine*

Cuisine is the menu strategy and tactics behind meal preparation and presentation. It undergirds the nourishing, nurturing, and networking that are the hallmarks of the tailgating experience. The entire panoply of goods and services required to stage consumer tailgates – food and drink, shelters and grills, catering and

clean-up – can be sourced through regional and local markets, but some provisions and gear are imported from consumers' hometowns as far away as either coast. One of our informants, Glen, cultivated a distinctive crop of potatoes on his distant farm for exclusive use at his tailgate. He called this crop "Blackthorn potatoes," in honor of the university, and he and his guests reveled in what they took to be the distinctive taste of the French fries made from the harvest. Abundant food and its ritualized consumption prevent the focus from shifting from a simple or exclusive emphasis on the excessive drinking of alcohol. Explosive drinking and its violent consequences are more characteristic of English soccer culture (Pearson, 2012), for example, than of American tailgating. Absent as well are the indulgences in fascist and criminal behavior associated with Italian soccer culture (Guschwan, 2012).

Whether our informants are sedentary fixtures, or nomads who traverse the ludic foodscape, they observe a minor dietetics that is space-creating in nature; what is good to eat is not determined by the state, but by the more fluid, fluctuating, immanent principles of the event of assembling a diet (Dolphijn, 2004: 78, 84). There is a tailgate cuisine that, while piggybacking on the dietary norms of mainstream culture, is distinctive (in some cases unique) and that forms the axis around which the tailgate revolves. Not only what people eat (Belk, 2012: 23), but how they eat, provides insight into the self, culture, and world they inhabit. A culture "communicates and clarifies its values, structures and priorities" through eating (Wirzba, 2011: 170).

If the decisive step for the "origin of human ensociality" was the "gathering of small groups at campsites," a vital next step was the "meat, fire and cooking" complex (and concomitant division of labor) that arose during prolonged habitation of those sites whose defense permitted them to become refuges, as the human digestive system evolved to consume fire-tenderized food (Wilson, 2012: 31, 47, 79). In Western culture, meat epitomizes traditional masculine consumption (Buerkle, 2012). Levi-Strauss (1968 [1990]) has contrasted the "endo-cuisine" or "inside cooking" of women meant to feed the immediate family with the "exo-cuisine" or "outside cooking" of men offered to guests and strangers (pp. 482–483). Exo-cuisine is associated with unenclosed cooking, where meat can be directly exposed to fire, as well as with the consumption of "excessive quantities" of food and drink. There is a "spontaneity and expansiveness" connected to male eating behavior (Buerkle, 2010: 254). Jones (2007) asserts that there is a "prosocial" tenor to an intimate meal and a "competitive" or "antisocial" tenor to a feast; the former connotes equality, the latter, status differentiation (p. 149). The culinary practices of tailgating reflect a hybridizing of these theorists' positions.

Feasting at tailgates resembles ancient Greek festivals that were attuned to the seasons; involved excessive feasting and drinking; included dancing, masquerades, marriages, sports, mock tournaments, comical taunting, and competitive displays among their activities; required generous hospitality toward strangers and guests; and often occasioned scuffling (Lefebvre, 1991: 201–202). Those festivals bound nature and humanity together, and the sacrifice (in terms of promiscuous, even reckless, consumption) they demanded was understood as a down payment on the

future (Lefebvre, 1991: 203–204). Even the deceased were incorporated into these communal festivals (Lefebvre, 1991: 206). The later Roman *convivium*, a ritual meal involving drinking, permitted women to participate as well (Civitello, 2011: 21, 34). To share table and food is to communicate that “life is not a possession to be jealously guarded” (Wirzba, 2011: 121). Tailgating revises these ancient festival practices in the present day, imparting a postmodern twist.

While tailgating might be understood as a weak-form version of culinary tourism, a kind of “exploratory gastronomy” (Jochnowitz, 2007: 119), it has already received a kind of left-handed recognition of its status in the world of *terroir* in Trubek’s (2007) designation of “bratwurst and Cornish potatoes” at a Madison tailgate before Badger games as a type of “regional” cuisine (p. 42). In addition to the chili, homemade relishes, and the specially grown potatoes mentioned earlier, our informants present a number of dishes meant to reflect their personal style, their hometown, and the fusion of these dimensions in the distinctive setting of the tailgate. Signature dishes (e.g. “Donna Dogs”), novelty baked goods (e.g. the “Cupola Cake,” shaped to resemble the university administration building), and other locally sourced delicacies (e.g. Amish cookies) all point to the characteristic “taste” of tailgating on the Blackthorn University campus. The ritual consumption of sacrificial mascots – the eating of rivals’ totems (i.e. roasted pig when the mascot is a razorback) – is common. This symbolic violence through feasting may mitigate physical brawling among rival fans.

### Carnavalesque

Carnavalesque is the aura of license that permeates the event. It manifests not only in conspicuous consumption and display but also in the flouting of everyday norms of social comportment. While the atmosphere of tailgating may not be as anarchic as that of an extreme Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) such as Burning Man or as licentious as that of festivals such as Mardi Gras, it contrasts significantly enough with the quotidian to be remarkable.

The conspicuous consumption of mass quantities of food and alcohol is most apparent. Consumers gorge on a variety of offerings, joking frequently about their intake and the weight gain certain to follow. Drinking is often proclaimed as the underlying reason for tailgating, where consumption patterns that would be considered problematic in everyday life are viewed as more the norm. Inebriation is common, and stuporous drinking is not uncommon, particularly among students and young townies. Underage drinking, whether sanctioned by complicit parents or pursued, however, furtively as a birthright by questing youths, is a frequent occurrence. “Getting hammered” is a principal preoccupation of our younger informants, and our more mature informants celebrate tailgating as “an excuse to start drinking at 6:00 in the morning.” Excessive or licentious drinking also is enshrined in T-shirt slogans (e.g. “Drink Like a Heavyweight”) and tabletop signs (e.g. Men: No Shirt, No Service/Women: No Shirt, Free Drinks).

Rule bending is a popular pursuit at tailgates. We have already described the latitude local law enforcement exercises in crowd management, frequently using

diplomacy and tact in confronting and correcting miscreants, in order to preserve the relaxed order of the day. Violations range from the relatively inconsequential (e.g. continuing to tailgate during the game, despite posted prohibitions and ostensibly concealing alcohol in plastic cups to appease security) to the potentially dangerous (e.g. dumping live charcoal into garbage bins despite the gas-only grilling rule enforced by security). Setting up before and decamping after posted time limits are common evasions of the rules, which are often facilitated by relationships fans cultivate with security guards through gifts of food.

Given the aura of revelry in the air, a belief in the disinhibiting effects of alcohol, and the relatively high concentration of young women tailgating throughout the day, the hope of “picking up,” “hooking up with,” or otherwise connecting with potential mates is strong among our younger male informants, who may treat the occasion as something of a *passaggiare* or promenade. The decorum of sensual *flânerie* is sometimes violated by a practice our female informants call “creeping,” in which older men leer, cajole, or otherwise contrive to relate inappropriately to female passersby. Our informant, Joanne, described such an encounter:

This is a sticker I was “lucky” enough to receive [spoken with sarcasm]... It says “It’s Sun Dress Saturday!” with a picture of the man who gave it to me. And each week they have a separate [theme]... He told me next week was going to be “Tube Top Saturday!” I’m not sure if he just goes around and sticks everyone with these... because after I received mine, we thought it was best to hightail it out... [Lots of women have had this experience.]

The ludic impulse is strong at the tailgate, as the pairing with an athletic event might suggest. The ability of play to “open spaces where new social relations take place... and shape... community” (Shepherd, 2011: 171) is evident at the tailgate, where “transformative play takes place in open space where a range of stories and conversations thrive” (Bial, 2004: 115). Every form of game that Caillois (2001) has identified may take place at a tailgate. Competitive games (*âgon*) may center on football, with the immediate match and the host of others televised on flat screens throughout the lots being the focus of spectatorship and commentary. Fantasy league enthusiasts may be especially invested in the action. Consumers actively engage in touch football games in all the lots. Corn hole (a contemporary variation of horseshoes) is an especially popular contest, as is the football-themed bola tossing game called tailgate toss.

Games of chance (*alea*) abound. Betting on the outcomes of the day’s football game and other televised matches is common. Poker and other card games are popular diversions. Simulations and role playing (*mimicry*) are pervasive, from the pickup games of football played in the character of personal heroes, through the pervasive modeling of sports jerseys and T-shirts bearing players’ numbers and university logos, to the wearing of ersatz memorabilia like throwback helmets. Costuming is a popular pursuit, with some fans wearing elaborate totemic garments and face paint, others wearing retro-styled clothing, and still others sporting

Spandex body suits in the style of superheroes. Halloween tailgating magnifies the tradition of costuming even further.

Vertigo (*ilinx*) may be the quintessential tailgate game. Altered consciousness may be the result of a contact high, achieved by mere exposure to the sights, sounds, and smells of the environment in which consumers are immersed. Informants describe being “overwhelmed” and “overstimulated” on occasion, a condition induced by the ludic intensity of surroundings (Kozinets et al., 2004). Drinking games abound at the tailgate – beer pong, beer bong, Jello shots, shot-gunning – as do conventional games, such as corn hole, that consumers repurpose for drinking. As one informant observed, “This game is played with one hand, leaving the other one free for drinking.” These games all serve to intensify the disorientation consumers can experience at the tailgate.

Although consumers of all ages and genders participate in tailgating, and despite the overall trend of the hestial engulfing the hermetic, our informants regard aspects of the phenomenon as something of a male preserve. Men were believed to take on a disproportionate responsibility for activities such as shopping, cooking, and even clean-up. The social burden of hospitality – including seeding and sustaining conversations – often fell on masculine shoulders. These behaviors were regarded as exceptional, as they were generally perceived to be more characteristically feminine, in their everyday performance. Even our female informants who assumed an equal or greater responsibility for a tailgate’s staging noted the higher than usual involvement of their menfolk in the party’s logistics. This role reversal, or role blurring, is noteworthy in the context of the carnivalesque. It is remarkable if interpreted as a public exaltation of the significance of hospitality.

Treated rather as an instance of role exaggeration, the patriarchal obligation of hosting likely has its primal roots in hunting rituals, with outdoor grilling being both a cultural survival and an invented tradition memorializing man the hunter. Certainly, our informants were alive to the backyard barbeque analogy of male privilege, a metaphor they often invoked in explaining the tailgate to us. Central to this conceit is the apotheosis of meat (Bulliet, 2005; Fiddes, 1991; Shweder, 2003; Wrangham, 2009).

Informants construed tailgating as a meat-centered feast. Meat was prepared and consumed in abundance and variety. Men often confided that tailgating was an excuse to eat red or fatty meat, which was “sadly” restricted in their everyday diet. In the cooking and consuming of meat, they found a satisfying reassertion of their masculine identities. This identity work was reinforced through the male bonding of drinking and sports talk. The ritual affirmation of masculinity (Thompson and Holt, 2004) in a cultural milieu shading toward the feminine is one important function of the tailgate, and meat helps put the carnal in the carnivalesque. All seven deadly sins are on parade at that tailgate, but some step livelier than others.

### *Canalization*

Canalization is the channeling of behaviors that might ordinarily prove to be dysfunctional into outlets that preserve the social order. It diverts such potentially



disruptive behaviors as excessive drinking from being expressed as hooliganism or sectarian violence. Informants often remark on the self-policing nature of tailgating.

Much fan behavior (whether potentially disruptive or constructive) is channeled during the course of a tailgate. The most apparent redirection has to do with the consumption of alcohol, as described by one informant, Clark:

At all of our tailgates, we have at least 15 to 40 bottles of Boone's [Farm Wine]. We had 45 last week. And we had maybe 4 bottles left. But this isn't college kids drinking, this is anybody from the class of '93 on that was at Michael Hall that I know and we all do the Boone's. I've had faculty out here doing the Boone's, I've had tons of people doing the Boone's. It's just sort of our tradition.

While most consumers drink socially at a tailgate, many drink to excess. Tailgating sanctions, if not encourages, a prolonged period of altered consciousness, subjecting binge drinking to the scrutiny of the community for evaluation and management.

Public intoxication is rampant at a tailgate, but its consequences appear muted through the self-policing efforts of the community at large and the discretionary management of law enforcement officials. Intoxication is widely regarded as an indulgence rather than a pathology, and its nonjudgmental facilitation appears to curtail dysfunctional consequences. We observed no instances of hooliganism and few instances of drunken belligerence that escalated beyond words. Indeed, when we encountered European informants at Blackthorn tailgates, they remarked in amazement on the absence of sectarian violence, given the abundance of alcohol and the intimate association of rival factions. During our study, we recorded one instance of apparent overreaction by law enforcement, but most instances of managing unruly drinking appeared to be non-confrontational. We observed instances of solicitous behavior between sober and heavily intoxicated fans, the former seeking to assist the latter in cases of extreme impairment.

Much potential violence between rival fans appears to be diffused through the convivial atmosphere of the tailgate. Good-natured teasing appears to be the rule, even after the game. Violence is sublimated in a variety of creative ways:

I was almost-forcibly given two plastic cups filled with trail mix before I left. One was made in support of [opponent], while the other for Blackthorn . . . a blue cup with nuts, pretzels, and [team color] M&M's for [opponent] and then a green cup with everything the same except the M&M's were [team colors] to represent Blackthorn.

Beyond symbolic sacrifices through M&M's (and other food stuffs), effigies of rival mascots may be ceremonially mistreated in tabletop displays. Should a mascot have physical correspondence in the animal or vegetal realm, the totem may be cooked and eaten by rival fans in a ritual of degradation and power usurpation. One informant, a local caterer, often included "sacrificial lamb" on his menu to foster an auspicious outcome to the game.



The entrepreneurial spirit is channeled at the tailgate beyond the populist activism of the event itself. Underemployed workers are able to supplement their income with seasonal catering jobs. Small firms are able to host evocative, efficient, and cost-effective gatherings for their employees and client base that forge and deepen commercial relationships. We observed the operations of one group of enterprising impresarios that tapped a luxury segment of fans and commanded an ultra-premium price for providing an elaborate “authentic game day experience” to its well-heeled clientele. Finally, nonprofit concerns are able to promote their causes to a concentrated and motivated mass of potential supporters. For example, the eco-footprint of the tailgate is reduced considerably through the distribution of recycling bags and bins to consumers who might otherwise be tempted to bulk or litter.

## **General discussion**

As myth charts ritual, and ritual in turn embodies and reenacts myth, so also do tailgating and the fan/brand community reciprocally animate one another. The performance of bounteous, boisterous hospitality engenders an experiential state we call *grooving*: the blissful absorption in the engagement and organic merger with the group. Tailgaters are entranced and enchanted by the round of life in the ludic foodscape. Enveloped in a thousand open stagings of the primal hearth, in a web of tribal campfire conversations about the vitality of community, our informants work skillfully to regulate the license that, left unchecked (or delegated entirely to the university), might derail the enterprise they seek to energize. Where combat characterizes action in the stadium, *comity* is the ritual trope that governs the lots and fields.

It requires but a small leap of faith to interpret the tailgate through the lens of classical mythology as an autumnal rite that celebrates abundance in the face of wintry austerity. Indeed, several of our informants adopt this point of view. Robert’s observation is instructive:

You know winter’s coming, you know it’s going to be depressing outside, snow and cold, you’re not going to be outside, so this is like your last blast enjoying being outside before it gets miserable . . .

Consider in this instance that the event occurs on a college campus, regarded by alumni (who, etymologically speaking, are “nurslings”) – whether *de facto* or *de jure*, given the brand’s wide umbrella – as the alma mater (again, etymologically speaking, the “bounteous mother”), commonly associated with Ceres, a goddess whose harvest festival likely arose from a simple thanksgiving meal to a raucous celebration of public joy. Consider also the close paring of Ceres with Bacchus, a god inspiring the wine-soaked revelry of ecstasy that exalted disinhibition of both prosocial and antisocial character.

Tailgating exhibits some of the same archaic features (homecoming, overindulgence, license, and the occasional wedding), albeit in much tamer form, as the

comedy of the commons enacted at such festivals as Burning Man (Sherry and Kozinets, 2007). The public communal feasting and drinking of the tailgate, including the atavistic practice of sympathetic magic (e.g. ritual cannibalism of consuming rival mascots), intensifies this archaism. Thus, its calendrical position and its perennial repetition support a mythopoeic interpretation of tailgating.

Tailgating can be construed as a weak-form TAZ (Bey, 2011) where formal structure is not so much resisted as gently challenged by an informal structure imposed by participants in search of an experience not merely of restrained self-reliance, but of proactive co-creation of brand community. Tailgating enjoys features in common with neotribalism (Cova et al., 2007; Maffesoli, 1996), most notably a shared worldview and ethos that revolve around communion through a consumption totem. Tailgating superficially resembles a wispy community insofar as it intersects with the domains of “entertainment and sociality” that are “expected to generate a surplus of fun” (Fine and Van den Scott, 2011: 1322–1323), but it is less ephemeral or transitory in character, and its identity focus looms larger in everyday life than in latent memory. Whereas Fine and Van den Scott (2011) parse wispy communities as clubs versus occasions and events versus gatherings, we find tailgating to be a hybrid of these forms and, consequently, to be a more durable or persistent entity. Beyond the team identification, dedicated partying, game day augmentation, experiential escape, and domestication of public space described by previous research, we find tailgating to be a placeway ritual service to cathect and carnalize community in a way that insures continuity.

Such persistence affords consumers, constituting brand/fan communities, the opportunity to periodically escape the confines of normative experiences for the visceral reprieve of bridled revelry. The tribal character of playful feasting emplaces the identity of brand/fan community. Through prodigious acts of public prosumption and charismatic co-creation, tailgaters forge an activist citizenry that animates the brand in utopian ways that its nominal licensors (i.e. university and economic developers) can neither completely control nor efficiently manage.

Through the ritual of vestival (Bradford and Sherry, 2015), consumers endow hestial placeways with a festive edge, which is modulated by cuisine, carnivalesque, and canalization. This ritual activity invigorates tailgating without jeopardizing its ongoing viability. Given that fan/brand community is a global phenomenon, we suspect a similar regulatory mechanism underlies a variety of different consumption encampment practices around the world. These sites are prospective fertile fields for future research.

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