

WOKE SAUSAGES AT THE CRACKER BARREL: GASTRONATIVISM AND THE SYNECDOCHIC POLITICS OF PLANT-BASED MEAT

DAVID ROONEY AND S. MAREK MULLER

In August 2022, the U.S. restaurant chain Cracker Barrel introduced a meatless sausage patty—the “Impossible Sausage”—to its breakfast menu. A viral social media backlash against the restaurant ensued. Using Fabio Parasecoli’s theory of gastronativism as a theoretical lens, we perform a critical rhetorical analysis of online commentaries regarding Cracker Barrel’s Impossible Sausage with an eye toward synecdochic representation. We contend that the online “culture war” that ensued within and beyond Cracker Barrel’s social media pages is representative of plant-based meat alternatives’ gastropolitical resonance in U.S. American identity construction. Two synecdoches emerge through our analysis, the Cracker Barrel restaurant as right-wing sacred space embedded in “tradition” and the Impossible Sausage as a leftist, progressive, contagious intrusion into this space. Discourses of faux-Southern identity, right-wing appeals to traditional ways of life, and white masculine victimhood are entrenched in these synecdochic tropes. Understanding the Cracker Barrel’s meatless menu debacle as a manifestation of gastronativist synecdoche demonstrates the ideological significance of meat and plant-based meat in contemporary U.S. political imaginaries. Given plant-based foods’ increasing popularity among

DAVID ROONEY is a doctoral student at the Moody Department of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. S. MAREK MULLER is an assistant professor of communication studies at Texas State University.

health- and environmentally conscious consumers, rhetoricians concerned with the intersections of food, power, and identity should take note of how flesh (non) consumption symbolically (re)constructs U.S. American gastropolitical identities.

As the adage goes, breakfast is the most important meal of the day. However, on August 1, 2022, breakfast was not merely a *meal*, it was also a *message*. The U.S. chain restaurant Cracker Barrel announced the introduction of a new item—an “Impossible Sausage” patty—to its Build Your Own Breakfast menu. Notably, the patty was not made of pig flesh but soy. The patty looked and tasted exactly like pork. First tested at select Cracker Barrels in 2021, the Impossible Sausage was introduced alongside other “trendy” menu updates like mimosas and stuffed pancakes.¹ It did not replace traditional meat-based breakfast items like bacon and pork sausage; rather, the Impossible Sausage was intended as a “savory, delicious sausage made from plants for meat lovers” for patrons “who just want to try something new.”² So, on August 1, Cracker Barrel’s official Facebook and Instagram pages posted an image of a white plate covered in golden hash browns, scrambled eggs, and two sausage patties. Stuck in one patty was a white flag reading “Impossible.” Below the image was the following caption: “Discover new meat frontiers. Experience the out of this world flavor of Impossible™ Sausage Made from Plants next time you Build Your Own Breakfast.”³

Cracker Barrel was not the first U.S. restaurant to offer an Impossible plant-based meat alternative on its menu. Other chain restaurants like Burger King, Qdoba, and White Castle offer Impossible’s flagship patties and crumbles to patrons to appeal to the 18–24 demographic as well as vegan, vegetarian, or flexitarian consumers.⁴ Today, 3 percent of the general U.S. population describes themselves as vegan or vegetarian—with notable gains in communities of color.⁵ Research on consumers shows that these demographics are “eager to pay a premium to get perceived health and environmental benefits,” thus encouraging food industry leaders to provide “look-alike, taste-alike plant-based or lab-based alternatives to traditional foods.”⁶ Thus, in terms of newsworthiness, Cracker Barrel’s minor menu change should have been a plant-based “Nothingburger”—but it was not.

Cracker Barrel’s meat alternative was *very* newsworthy to its customers. Within minutes of their Facebook announcement, an unexpected backlash ensued. Perhaps more expectedly, the backlash started in the Facebook comments. Within 24 hours, the post amassed over 7,000 comments and 3,500

shares, much more than the usual 100 or so comments per Cracker Barrel post.⁷ Comments were emotional. Patrons were disappointed at best and apoplectic at worst, “Are you kidding me? Who do you think your customer base is? Stick to the basics that made your franchise a success.”⁸ Top comments included, “don’t push that crap in my direction” and “this is not what Cracker Barrel was to be all about.”⁹ The social media pile-on continued with commenter after commenter bashing the company’s decision to include a plant-based sausage to its menu. Perhaps the most summative representation of these critiques came from one user’s comment, “you just lost the customer base, congratulations on being woke and going broke.”¹⁰

The viral backlash spread across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. As patron outrage over the Impossible patty grew, amused pro-Impossible commenters began “trolling” offended customers. One commenter posted on Cracker Barrel’s Facebook post, “imagine being this triggered over breakfast.” Twitter user @whyangelinawhy went viral when she quipped, “everyone’s having a normal one on the Cracker Barrel Facebook page.”¹¹ While showcasing the apparent hilarity of patrons’ outrage, @whyangelinawhy commented, “funny how these are the same people who yell about businesses being able to make their own decisions.”¹² People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) then sub-tweeted, “if meat-eaters think vegan sausages are gross and processed, wait ‘til they hear how their ‘usual’ sausage of rejected meat is made”—which was, in turn, screenshotted and tweeted again by @whyangelinawhy with the caption, “lord lmao.”¹³

Caught in the middle of a viral outrage that they did not expect, Cracker Barrel’s public relations team did not comment on the Facebook post. Instead, in a statement to the *Washington Post*, the company explained:

We appreciate the love our fans have for our all-day breakfast menu. At Cracker Barrel, we’re always exploring opportunities to expand how our guests experience breakfast and provide choices to satisfy every taste bud—whether people want to stick with traditional favorites like bacon and sausage or are hungry for a new, nutritious plant-based option like Impossible Sausage.¹⁴

The statement was not enough to stem criticism; the comments kept coming. Today, the thread sits at over 22,000 comments. Journalist Amber Lake put it best when she stated that Cracker Barrel “wasn’t expecting to incite culture wars . . . But that’s exactly what it did.”¹⁵

Some commentators connected this social media outburst to previous

Cracker Barrel controversies. In 2021, a viral tweet suggested the eatery's name was inherently racist, hypothesizing that "cracker" was a slang term for whip and that the "cracker barrel" was where whips were sold.¹⁶ Conservative journalist Tim Young accused Democrats of "making non-racist things racist."¹⁷ Cracker Barrel, explained Young, "is a pretty decent, wholesome place if you're a sane person."¹⁸ A year later, during the height of the Impossible Sausage debacle, TikTok user Alina Gene suggested that fear of Others was the source of patrons' viral rage against Impossible patties. Commenters showed their agreement by calling Cracker Barrel a "Jim Crow-themed Applebees."¹⁹

Young's media framing of Cracker Barrel as a bastion of conservative wholesomeness and TikTok users' depiction of it as an anti-progressive space has a storied political history. Indeed, fashioning restaurants as "proxies for the American electorate" can be a viable strategy to understand culture and politics.²⁰ Ashli Q. Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre, both communication studies scholars, have argued that stories about food—which is appropriate to eat and "tussles" over the best means of preparation—are central to the constitution of a common identity, particularly of the U.S. American "South."²¹ However, stories about food also can dismiss or mask violence in the pursuit of a common Southern identity. For instance, rhetorician Anjali Vats argues that Paula Deen's selective narrative of Southern food hospitality sanitized the racist history of the region's food production systems while downplaying Deen's own anti-Black actions in the food industry.²²

Building on such work, we examine the backlash to the introduction of Impossible Sausage through the theory of gastronautivism, as outlined by food studies scholar Fabio Parasecoli. Gastronautivism seeks to analyze the communicative use of food to articulate who does and does not properly belong to a community.²³ We further assess the backlash against Cracker Barrel from a critical rhetorical perspective concerned with synecdochic representations. We draw from and build upon previous scholarship on the communicative effects of food production and consumption—in particular, scholarship concerned with the material and symbolic rhetorical practices enacted through the consumption of "meat." As opposed to culinary nationalism, which centers the nation-state, our invocation of Parasecoli's gastronautivist lens enables us to dissect how Cracker Barrel itself was a shared, sacred space through which to assert particular U.S. American identities—and, by extension, how the introduction of Impossible Sausage manifested as both an Other's invasion into that space and as an identity threat to the restaurant's most loyal patrons.

We suggest that the Cracker Barrel and the Impossible Sausage each

functioned as a type of “gastronautivist synecdoche.” The Cracker Barrel was represented synecdochally as a safe, shared space to assert an “authentic” Southern identity. These tropes of Southern authenticity, however, served not as authentic representations of Southern-ness but as dog-whistles for right-wing reactionary politics. The Impossible Sausage, meanwhile, acted as synecdoche for leftists, elitists, environmentalists, vegans, feminists, queer people, and other “woke” populations that intruded into the Cracker Barrel. Impossible Sausages were discursively transformed into the material-rhetorical symbol of “woke sausage” in which offended patrons found “a language of victimization and sufferance” that provided “a sense of rootedness, comfort and security” in juxtaposition to a belief that tradition is being lost.²⁴ The gastronativist rhetoric at the heart of this social media culture war was imbued with tropes of “white masculine victimhood” in which plant-based meat functioned as proof of patrons’ rhetorical marginalization and, more broadly, the marginalization of conservative, white, Christian, masculine, heterosexual, all-American Americans.²⁵

We begin our analysis by locating the Cracker Barrel restaurant and the Impossible Sausage within historical and economic contexts. We then offer a review of pertinent literature in rhetorical studies, food studies, and environmental communication studies. Next, we conduct a critical rhetorical analysis of the “woke sausage” controversy with an emphasis on textual artifacts gathered from social media commentary and online journalism covering the response. Through these texts, we highlight how the gastronativist synecdoche portrayed Cracker Barrel as a right-wing shared, even sacred, space and attacked “wokeness” through critiques of the equally synecdochic sausage. We close by suggesting communication scholars examine the ideological and material roles of nonhuman animal consumption in seemingly minor “culture wars” on social media to better grasp the role of meat—plant-based or flesh-based—in constituting cultural conflicts. Our work models how to critique plant-based based meats not as mere products but as important symbols and material invocations of gastronomic protest in human (and more-than-human) politics.

CONTEXTUALIZING IMPOSSIBLE FOODS AND CRACKER BARREL

To understand the apoplectic rage directed toward Cracker Barrel by its patrons in August 2022, we must understand the restaurant chain itself—and,

of course, the plant-based sausage at the heart of the social media controversy. Cracker Barrel and Impossible Foods share in their missions an emphasis on temporality. Cracker Barrel ties itself to visions of older, simpler times, whereas Impossible Foods frames itself as a future-facing food producer.

CRACKER BARREL: RESTAURANT OF THE PAST

Founded by Dan Evins in 1969, Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, Inc. harkens to the days of small-town general stores in which foodstuffs were shipped in barrels. Originating in Lebanon, Tennessee, where Evins served as an oil jobber at Consolidated Oil, Evins “developed an awareness of the challenges facing Shell’s rural gas stations—owned by Consolidated Oil—from highway expansion” and “decided to build a combined restaurant and gas station as an attempt to remedy the company’s problem.”²⁶ Although the chain remains headquartered in small-town Lebanon, over 600 Cracker Barrels in over 40 states have opened. Led by CEO Sandra Cochrane, the company is valued at \$2.4 billion and employs over 70,000 people.²⁷ Each location consists of a sit-down restaurant and a “country store” that sells snacks and old-fashioned trinkets.

Cracker Barrel’s controlled and replicated usage of space, decorations, and product offerings reinforces a “homestyle” atmosphere reminiscent of “a conservative Americana” meant to “moderate the meaning of American citizenship” and define American identity “in conservative evangelical terms.”²⁸ For example, Cracker Barrels often are adorned with antique road signs, relics like old tin cans and bicycles, and seasonal décor accompanied with religious sayings, such as “God bless this home.”²⁹ Next to the cashier, customers can browse a kiosk of items for sale, often including audio books by Christian evangelists and gospel albums produced by Cracker Barrel’s recording label. Each restaurant also has a fireplace above which “a stern, authoritative, male portrait is hung next to a female’s demure portrait. Juxtaposed in between is a buck’s head with a nineteenth century rifle prominently displayed below.”³⁰ The prominent display of a buck’s head above the fireplace indicates that hunting, and subsequent animal consumption, may be a more visible aspect of Cracker Barrel’s identity than in other eateries. In the adjacent “country store,” patrons can also purchase a combination of old-timey candies and Christian-themed decor.

The association between Cracker Barrel and U.S. conservatism, evangelical

or not, is well-documented. During the 2012 reelection of Barack Obama and again during the 2014 midterms, political journalist Dave Wasserman named the elections a battle of “Cracker Barrel versus Whole Foods,” pitting “down-home, Republican trending” Cracker Barrel patrons against “well-educated, Democrat trending” Whole Foods shoppers.³¹ Wasserman’s observation was not without merit. In the 2010 midterm elections, when Republicans regained control of the U.S. House of Representatives, 82 percent of “flipped” districts housed a Cracker Barrel. In 2012, Obama won 77 percent of all U.S. counties containing a Whole Foods compared to 29 percent with a Cracker Barrel.³² These statistics suggest that Cracker Barrel operates as a gastropolitical space where conservative sentiments and food intertwine.

Cracker Barrel’s food scene is marketed as a pillar of Southern hospitality as “for five decades, guests at Cracker Barrel® have enjoyed generous portions of high-quality, homestyle food offered at an everyday value.”³³ Patrons in the sit-down restaurant are tempted by roadside billboards in which a man seated in a country rocking chair invites them to “Dine and Unwind” for “Family Meals. Country Style.”³⁴ The restaurant’s traditional recipes are “rooted in Southern cooking.”³⁵ Menu options favor meat, cream, and butter, like chicken and dumplings and buttermilk biscuits. When the brand introduced a bone-in fried chicken to its menu in 2019, Vice President of Culinary Cammie Spillyards explained, “there is so much nostalgia and emotion connected to fried chicken. Nothing brings me back to fond childhood memories with my family like [it].”³⁶ In short, the food and décor at Cracker Barrel appeals to a nostalgic sense of home rooted in Southern tradition.

Since the 1990s, Cracker Barrel has been riddled with civil rights complaints. Journalist DB Kelly asserts it is an “almost shocking number of scandals”³⁷ derived in part from poor management and partially from what Young labels as the company’s narrative strategy to present patrons with a “white, heteronormative, Southern Evangelical family experience.”³⁸ In 1991, Cracker Barrel’s human relations department issued a company memorandum instructing managers to fire its homosexual employees and to refuse to hire new ones. Although the policy was quickly rescinded, routine accusations of unfair employment practices spawned nearly two decades of targeted protests by LGBTQ+ activists.³⁹ Their corporate statement called the memorandum a “well intentioned over-reaction to the perceived values of our customers.”⁴⁰ In the early 2000s, investigations by the U.S. Department of Justice found evidence of racial employment discrimination in over fifty locations, and the NAACP filed an additional \$100 million suit. Although the company has

made efforts to improve its public image in recent years, it still only scores a 60/100 on the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index.⁴¹

Cracker Barrel has long been advertised as a gateway to the past. This storied past, however, is reflected in the many controversies impacting the brand. The company's partnership with Impossible Foods would prove to be a strange bedfellow given the plant-based brand's opposite chronemic tilt.

IMPOSSIBLE FOODS: "MEAT" OF THE FUTURE

Founded in 2011 by Patrick Brown, a professor of biochemistry, Impossible Foods Inc. is valued at \$7 billion. Its inaugural, and most famous, product is the "Impossible Burger," which first debuted in 2016 at chef David Chang's Momofuku Nishi restaurant. In 2018, Impossible expanded its reach to over 5,000 restaurants in the United States and Hong Kong. White Castle made national news by becoming the first major U.S. chain restaurant to add the Impossible Burger to its menu, quickly followed by Burger King. By 2019, Impossible burgers, ground meat, and sausages became available to restaurants and laypeople.⁴² As of 2022, the company sells products in nearly 25,000 grocery stores and approximately 40,000 restaurants across three continents—more than any other plant-based brand.⁴³

Impossible Foods seeks to address issues of climate change, environmental degradation, and animal rights and welfare through the creation and dissemination of plant-based alternatives to meat, fish, and dairy products.⁴⁴ With a mission to eradicate human consumption of all animal products by 2035, Brown's company emerged when he "realized the devastation of the current food system and wanted to create a sustainable alternative—starting with meat."⁴⁵ Impossible products produce 89 percent fewer greenhouse gas emissions than traditional animal-sourced meats. When accounting for the "processing" involved in producing ingredients, "even poorly produced plant-based meats are better, environmentally, than meat from well-raised livestock."⁴⁶ Producing an Impossible Sausage uses 11 percent less water and 18 percent of the land compared to animal-sourced pork.⁴⁷ Such savings are important because "if plant-based meats end up claiming a significant market share, the surplus land could be allowed to revert to forest or other natural vegetation; these store carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and contribute to biodiversity conservation."⁴⁸ In other words, Impossible Foods could help to mitigate climate change.

Impossible Foods' two biggest challenges have been mimicking the look and taste of animal-flesh in its products and achieving price parity with its normalized and subsidized meat-based competitors.⁴⁹ The gastronomical powers of biochemistry resolved the first challenge. Journalist Tanya Flink explains, "Impossible patties are a product of science, and the ingredients reflect that."⁵⁰ Ingredients include soy protein concentrate (which makes up most of the "flesh"), coconut oil (to mimic meat's fatty mouthfeel and greasy sizzle), starches, methylcellulose, salt, fortified vitamins and minerals, and (of course) "natural flavors." Impossible differentiates itself from other brands by adding a plant-based version of heme (a protein in blood) to give consumers a bloodier, meatier eating experience. While Impossible's fleshy *mimesis* has been successful in replicating the taste of meat, price parity remains a challenge. Plant-based meats cost about 41 percent more than their animal-sourced counterparts.⁵¹ That said, through its continued growth, Impossible Foods is on track to reach its goal of price parity within the next two years.⁵²

Contra Cracker Barrel's nostalgic look towards past tradition, Impossible Sausage is connected to visions of a better future; one where animal consumption is made less desirable, to the benefit of both animals and the broader environment. We suggest that this temporal disjunct partially contributed to their divergent associations for upset Cracker Barrel patrons, allowing patrons to see Impossible Sausage as opposed to tradition. We now explain how Cracker Barrel's social media pile-on works rhetorically, first turning to synecdoche—the study of how a part functions as a stand-in in for a larger object. Then, we turn to Parasecoli's concept of gastronativism, which describes the use of food to determine who and what behaviors properly belong to a people. Finally, we examine some longstanding meanings tied to animal consumption in the United States, particularly the use of meat and dairy consumption to reinforce norms of whiteness, gender, and sex.

ENVIRONMENTAL SYNECDOCHE AND GASTROPOLITICAL RHETORIC

A synecdoche is a powerful rhetorical device in which a "part" stands in for a "whole." A rhetor's main synecdochic task is to choose *which part* should represent *which whole*, particularly in rhetorical situations imbued with political strife, for a politically resonant synecdoche must "encapsulate the polity in their being."⁵³ Strategizing synecdoche is thus a "motivational calculus,"⁵⁴ especially when stakeholders assign divergent meanings to the same symbol,

a “rhetorical clash between competing interests that creates differing social realities with synecdochic constructions.”⁵⁵ Synecdochic analysis therefore identifies where and how synecdoche functions to render “big and complex ‘truths’ more accessible.”⁵⁶ In other words, synecdoche uses part-to-whole substitutions to simplify complex ideological battles.

Studies of synecdoche in environmental communication show how nonhuman animals “stand in” as representatives for broader socio-cultural issues. Jane Rowe, an environmental communication scholar, describes how the Mattaponi tribe drew on the American shad, which faced potential environmental damage from a proposed reservoir, as a synecdoche for the physical and cultural eradication of the Mattaponi by Western science.⁵⁷ Rhetorician Mark P. Moore finds that tales by European settlers and Indigenous tribes in the Southwestern United States drew on another fish synecdoche—representing salmon as a microcosm of all life, such that decline in the salmon population indicates a broader environmental crisis.⁵⁸ These synecdoches “maintain conflict by becoming issues in and of themselves due to their realness and embeddedness in struggling ecosystems as well as environmental politics.”⁵⁹ In these instances, the “parts” standing in for the “whole” are not intangible constructs but material living beings.

Drawing on the lineage of animal-as-synecdoche, we suggest that food—particularly food that unsettles norms of animal-consumption—has synecdochic importance in drawing boundaries of identity and cultural conflict. We are not the first to identify this connection; Kenneth Burke’s analysis of “The Ancient Mariner” asserts, “consubstantiality is got by the eating of food in common. ‘Tell me what you eat, and I’ll tell you what you are.’ And in the ‘what you are,’ there is implicit the ‘what you will be.’”⁶⁰ Thus, food and identity are inherently intertwined. Barry Brummett, for example, discusses the use of food as synecdoche for political figures, explaining how Ronald Reagan’s fondness for jellybeans represents unpretentious, middle-class American values.⁶¹

Environmental rhetoricians have long studied food’s communicative power.⁶² Appadurai, for example, argues that food is a “highly condensed social fact” with a “special semiotic force.”⁶³ Food is a material-rhetorical symbol—that is to say, it is “gastro-political.” It “cannot be decoded based solely on its flavor” because “the full width of its meaning cannot be grasped without analyzing its interaction with other discourses.”⁶⁴ A “food event” invokes gastropolitical discourse when the edible symbol “is animated by particular cultural concepts and mobilized.”⁶⁵ Parasecoli adds that *places*

and *spaces* for food consumption carry rhetorical weight because food consumption occurs in spaces that, through the dual performances of cooking and eating, are turned into culturally significant places.⁶⁶ Anna M. Young and Justin Eckstein show how Southern chef Sean Brock draws on Lowcountry situatedness as gastronomic topoi—using place as flavor, much like Greg Dickinson’s analysis of Olive Garden as a blend of vaguely Italian aesthetics within suburban spaces.⁶⁷ Relatedly, scholars studying gastropolitical food events note how edible symbols become vehicles for patriotism, or “gastronationalism.”⁶⁸ In times of national upheaval or perceived threat to the nation-state, gastronationalism names particular foodstuffs as both “nationally significant” and “placed in potential jeopardy by external forces.”⁶⁹ Examples include conflicts between French citizens and global animal rights activists over “foie gras,” a national delicacy prepared through the torture of ducks or geese, and East Asian debates over if dishes like minced pork rice constitute authentic “Taiwanese” or “Chinese” cuisine.⁷⁰ Gastronationalism often takes the form of shunning or modifying the food of another nation. During the Iraq war, some U.S. eateries rebranded French fries as “freedom fries,” a patriotic challenge to France’s refusal to join the U.S. coalition against Saddam Hussein.⁷¹

In our analysis, we examine “gastronativism,” which concerns how food is used to articulate community (non)belonging. Parasecoli’s articulation of gastronativism concerns how food cultures “provide parameters for *defining behaviors and objects as acceptable or deviant*” [emphasis added].⁷² Parasecoli asks, “what better way to debase [people] than pointing to coarseness, unhealthiness, low quality or even impurity of what they eat?”⁷³ Gastronativism *can* involve a nation, but it also involves a host of regional/globalized identity formations around food, where food is taken as a symbol for various identity categories such as gender/race/class/education/religion/etcetera.

The gastronativist construction of identity is not necessarily exclusionary. Parasecoli contrasts exclusionary gastronativism, which seeks to unjustly exclude others, with non-exclusionary gastronativism, which aims to extend “rights, resources and well-being to the disenfranchised and the oppressed.”⁷⁴ For instance, communication scholar Kathleen M. German describes how a cookbook written by Jewish women imprisoned at the Theresienstadt concentration camp acted as a communal ritual—a form of spiritual revolt.⁷⁵ Other examples of non-exclusionary gastronativism include holy rituals concerning when and how to consume food, such as religious fasts or

ritualistic consumption (e.g., the consumption of the Eucharist in Christian denominations).⁷⁶

In this essay we discuss the role of exclusionary gastronativism as it pertains to meat and meat-alternative consumption—delineating who does or does not belong by their choice of protein. As discussed in greater detail later, gastronativism here intertwines with synecdoche as consumption of meat or vegan alternatives acts as a stand-in for larger conflicts and concepts: political affiliation, gender performance, sexuality, environmentalism and more. The gastronativist model is borne from fears of “invisible invaders”—that is to say, “dangerous intrusions caused by the unavoidable necessity of ingestion.”⁷⁷ Parasecoli warns that “those who subscribe to this worldview experience politics as a zero-sum game: wherever one gains, somebody loses.”⁷⁸ In exclusionary gastronativism, food represents a field “in which the Other . . . is resisted and at times fought against,”⁷⁹ where “those who demand equality are a threat to the acquired privileges of social groupings.”⁸⁰ For example, eating a “foreign meat” might be used to signal an Other’s savagery, as has been noted in studies of anti-African racism and bushmeat in international discourses surrounding Ebola.⁸¹ Unlike works in communication studies that find liberatory identity formations through food (e.g., Ashli Stokes and Wendy Atkins-Sayre on Southern cuisine), exclusionary gastronativism is restrictive and centered around the creation of enemies. According to Parasecoli:

It does not matter if those foes are weaker and more vulnerable than the members of the “in” group, or if they are just demanding the recognition and respect of their rights as citizens. The social and political arrangements that could derive from embracing the positions of those who live or act according to outlooks that do not coincide with the “real” community are branded as “wrong,” “sacrilegious,” “unnatural,” “abnormal,” or just plain “weird.”⁸²

Exclusionary gastronativism often is organized in a grassroots manner, from “below” rather than “on high.” It is “messy and not really choreographed . . . coming from the ever-bubbling spring of the ‘real people.’”⁸³ For example, the popular rebranding of French fries as “freedom fries” during the Iraq War arose from a single restaurateur, Neal Rowland, who changed the item’s name on menus at his North Carolina restaurant, Cubbie’s.⁸⁴ Rowland’s protest was captured in a number of media outlets, inspiring other restaurants to re-name French fries “freedom fries.” Later, Representatives Bob Ney and Walter Jones directed House cafeterias to adopt the “freedom fries” terminology for their

menu, citing Rowland as an example of a “local restaurant owner” sending a message to the French opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.⁸⁵

Generally, flesh- and plant-based diets constitute and are constituted by “identity” and how those identities are embedded in unequal power relations between/across species. In the United States, plant-based eating often acts as an enemy for exclusionary gastronomists because, as Samantha Mosier, a political scientist, and Arbindra Rimal, a professor of agriculture, argue, “the American diet is substantially richer in meat and animal by-products compared to other countries . . . To not be a typical American ‘meat-and-potatoes’ omnivore is to be at odds with normative behaviour.”⁸⁶ Ecofeminist rhetorician Richard Rogers and vegan-feminist scholar Carol Adams describe how fetishization of meat operates as an integral component in discourses and practices of cisheteronormative patriarchy.⁸⁷ Likewise, Iselin Gambert, a professor of law, and Tobias Linné, a communication scholar, write that animal-sourced foodstuffs are materially and symbolically central to alt-right mediascapes and online “manospheres.”⁸⁸ They argue that some “diet constructs may be more socially palatable for certain ideological beliefs”—suggesting, in other words, that far-right and/or hyper-masculine personas might tend toward flesh-heavy diets as a part of their social performance.⁸⁹

As diet and ideological beliefs are co-constitutive, it is important for critical environmental communication scholarship to engage these connections—particularly in the area of meat consumption and right-wing beliefs.⁹⁰ Mosier and Rimal connect red meat consumption to U.S. American political partisanship. They find that “men and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who often identify as conservative or Republican, are more likely to consume red and processed meats more frequently and in higher volumes compared to other groups.”⁹¹ Interestingly, “respondents identifying as white were more likely to report a preference for a meat-inclusive diet irrespective of partisanship.”⁹² Stănescu contends, “one can note a pattern between an earlier time in American history in which the white working class responded to anxiety of falling wages and increasing domestic immigration by focusing on issues of meat and dairy consumption, and the contemporary moment.”⁹³ The contemporary “alt-right’s” memeified construction of the vegan, neutered, effeminate “soy boy” relies heavily on xenophobic anti-Asian tropes from the late-19th and early 20th centuries. Depictions of East Asian men as “effeminate rice eaters” were used both to justify European colonialism in Asia and stoke anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S.⁹⁴

Meat has a contested meaning in the rhetorical construction of a Southern

food identity—at times a vehicle for commonality despite social hierarchies but also a means of exclusion. Atkins-Sayre and Stokes analyze the Southern Foodways Alliance, a 1,200-member organization created in 1999 to celebrate Southern food heritage with films, books, and magazines, with a particular eye to those marginalized by race, class, gender, and labor hierarchies. Atkins-Sayre and Stokes suggest that the Southern Foodways Alliance has articulated a hospitable account of Southern identity, allowing “meat-eaters and vegetarians” alike to tap into nostalgia and shared food experiences.⁹⁵ Other food scholars, like Lily Kelting, suggest that a nostalgic relationship to meat can produce more exclusion than hospitality.⁹⁶ Kelting analyzes Southern cookbooks that encourage readers to pay for upscale quail or substitute veal for turtles, arguing that these recipes seek the cultural capital of a specific Southern experience without the “lived socioeconomic consequences of eating hunted or foraged foods.”⁹⁷ As Southern food identity is reshaped and redefined, the focus on “meat as a way to root their cuisine in place” may animate “nostalgic narratives that might be dangerously continuous and stable,” attempting to reclaim a specific historical reading of Southern cooking from an insurmountable distance.⁹⁸ Our analysis suggests that some Cracker Barrel patrons hold a similar nostalgic attachment to meat that inspires a belief that the restaurant’s Southern country identity is watered down by the introduction of the Impossible Sausage breakfast item.

Although meat consumption has been associated with a variety of beliefs as outlined above, an essential component—what Adams refers to as the static part of meat’s meaning—is the killing of an animal for food, a ritualized performance of dominance.⁹⁹ As a “meat alternative,” Impossible Sausage threatens to sever the tie between meat (and its attendant symbolic meanings) and the death of animals, shifting meat away from its traditional locus. The theme that flesh consumption and a narrow account of Southern identity are intertwined, emerges throughout the social media backlash to Cracker Barrel’s introduction of the Impossible Sausage. Within exclusionary gastronativism’s “zero-sum” lens, the introduction of the Impossible Sausage endangers the cultural hegemony of normative flesh consumption associated with right-wing political views and hegemonic masculinity. Intertwining the above literature on the use of food as a vehicle for identity with animal synecdoche, we suggest that Cracker Barrel and the Impossible Sausage serve as distinct but interrelated gastronativist synecdoches representative of reactionary right-wing identity politics and discourses of white masculine victimhood. As a synecdoche for generalized threats to white right-wing

masculinity, the Impossible Sausage became associated with other, non-meat, objects of concern perceived to pose a similar danger, including queerness, gender non-conformity, and environmentalism. Simultaneously, Cracker Barrel is constructed as a spatial representative of the values and subjects threatened by the Impossible Sausage.

We next unpack how Cracker Barrel came to represent this gastronativist space, before examining how Impossible Sausage became an edible symbol of intrusion.

SYNECDOCHIC CRACKER BARREL: “OUR” HOME AWAY FROM HOME

A common theme in the backlash to the Cracker Barrel’s menu change was an accusation that the restaurant had departed from its traditional model of business and betrayed its base’s common values. The restaurant had gone “woke.” Popularized by young Black people, “woke” describes people who are conscious of the mechanisms of violent structures of white supremacy.¹⁰⁰ “Wokeness” now functions as an ideograph for racial justice, LGBTQIA+ rights, police reform, pro-immigration policies, environmentalism, and other supposedly “progressive” political orientations. Social media commenters lamented the change and synecdochically portrayed a pre-Impossible Sausage Cracker Barrel—the *real* Cracker Barrel—as threatened norms, including old-fashioned cooking, family values, Southern identity, country food, and conservative politics.

For commenters, the political and cultural values of Cracker Barrel were as important—if not more important—than the food’s taste and quality. Thus, Cracker Barrel’s adoption of the Impossible Sausage inspired shock and outrage. Patrons balked that *their* Cracker Barrel fell prey to the ideological forces behind a conspiratorial plant-based agenda. To reflect the stylistic choices of these outraged comments, misspellings in quoted material throughout the paper are reproduced. Commenter Sandra Wiggins expressed disbelief on Cracker Barrel’s Facebook post, declaring she could not “believe that Cracker Barrel has bought into this ‘fake meat’ junk!”¹⁰¹ Steve Halstead implored Cracker Barrel to “STICK TO BEING THE COUNTRY RESTAURANT WE ALL LOVED SINCE YOU BEGAN YOUR CHAIN.”¹⁰² James Satterlee suggested the existence of the Impossible Sausage option invalidated Cracker Barrel’s claim to producing old-fashioned country meals: “Listen as I said If

I want plants I will have a salad and if I want a good old fashioned country meal I will NOT go to Cracker Barrel!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”¹⁰³ Catherine Witt argued that plant-based meat was antithetical to Southern identity, writing, “Your customer base is the South!! We don’t eat plant based meat in the South! I hope this crap falls flat!!”¹⁰⁴ Customers balked at the seeming contradiction between flesh-based “country” food and Impossible’s plant-based “crap.”

Southern food often is defined by an authentic appeal to varied “country traditions.”¹⁰⁵ In the case of Cracker Barrel, it was unclear what delimited “country” for these commenters. Parasecoli argues that gastronativist appeals to regional traditions often leverage “emotional attachment and sense of pride in culinary traditions” to generate an intuitive skepticism against change and the unfamiliar.¹⁰⁶ He recalls a 2018 interview of former Polish Foreign Minister Witold Wazczykowski, who accused plant-based diets of unsettling “traditional Polish values” vis-à-vis a “mixture of cultures and races, a world of cyclists and vegetarians who use only renewable energy sources and fight all manifestations of religion.”¹⁰⁷ Although not analogous to Cracker Barrel’s synecdochic representations, both instances share a distinct rhetorical tactic—the use of select “ideas, values, and practices revolving around ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’” to redefine and limit identity through the vehicle of food.¹⁰⁸

Wistfully recalling memories of a pre-Impossible Sausage Cracker Barrel, commenters appealed to a country heritage centered around U.S. right-wing politics. Joshua Taylor juxtaposed “lefty food” to the traditional values Cracker Barrel was imagined to represent, calling on the company to stop “pushing this woke garbage,” as customers “go to Cracker Barrel for Traditional Values and Traditional Country Cooking . . . If you want to serve Lefty food, open an alternative store.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, on Cracker Barrel’s Instagram page, @tarajones76550 compared the restaurant’s change to another fast-food chain: “Cracker Barrel you are as bad as Chick-fil-A, and not sticking to your Conservative values. I hope you lost most of your customers, and go bankrupt. Cracker Barrel you are brainwashed sheep, and suck now!!!”¹¹⁰ @tarajones76550, like others, believed Cracker Barrel has abandoned its conservative values in service of appealing to a wider customer base. Several Instagram comments mirrored this desire to return to tradition, with @jewell.jackson declaring “go back the way you were” and @windpar calling for Cracker Barrel to “go back to the basics that everyone has enjoyed for years.”¹¹¹ Ironically, these commenters wanted Cracker Barrel to “return to the past”—the very branding strategy the organization had relied upon for decades.

Rather than seeing the Impossible Sausage addition as a mere menu

addition, these commenters framed the plant-based sausage as a contagion corrupting the Southern soul of Cracker Barrel. Rick Bucy declared that the new menu item had destroyed the restaurant's gastronomic credibility in its entirety—as “I won't be eating there if that is where Cracker Barrel is going. I go there to eat meat not plant based food.”¹¹² Tim Heldenbrand also chalked up a total rejection of the restaurant to the addition of the Impossible Sausage option, declaring that “needless to say that my favorite restaurant is no longer. Tere menu change was a BIG mistake. By Bye Crackerbarrel.”¹¹³ In short, the Impossible Sausage option renders *all* of Cracker Barrel's food suspect.

Still others defined Cracker Barrel as a traditional space in opposition to “wokeness,” threatened by the introduction of Impossible Sausage. Facebook commenter Tiffany Eli Chevront called on the company to “understand your base.” For her, the issue was not “that there are [new food options], it's that yet another woke company will bite the dust.”¹¹⁴ Others, like Kim Rosa-Lima, declared, “clearly Cracker Barrel didn't read the room,” implying that the company was unaware of how antagonistic their customer base was to plant-based options.¹¹⁵ Other Facebook commenters predicted imminent financial and moral ruin for the company due to its adopted wokeness. Michael Duke predicted that “fake sausage” would mean “y'all will be out of business in 6 months.”¹¹⁶ Stephane Achille declared “once you go woke, you go broke,” a phrasing mirrored by others in the shorter “Go woke, go broke.”¹¹⁷ In these depictions, Cracker Barrel's legacy became synonymous with a broader conservative Southern social reality—such that the addition of a new breakfast option threatened to sever the connection between the two and ruin the company.

Although many commenters subtly juxtaposed Cracker Barrel's “traditional values” to plant-based options, Joseph Smith, a commenter on Facebook, analogized the introduction of the Impossible Sausage as a shift from “Trump's America” to “Biden's America.” Issuing a call to action to Cracker Barrel aficionados, he posted, “If we don't get Trump back this country is in trouble. This is only the beginning. A vote for Trump is a vote for freedom . . . There shall be no hippie meat in trumps America!!!!”¹¹⁸ Here, the Cracker Barrel synecdoche expands beyond just country tradition or authentic Southern cooking, representing a far-right political orientation wherein proteins act as stand-ins for opposing candidates—a crude version of Wasserman's electoral battle of Whole Foods vs. Cracker Barrel. Smith made the negative relationship between two social realities clear—the introduction of Impossible Sausage

turned Cracker Barrel into “Biden’s America” as in “Trump’s America,” no “hippie meats” can exist.

Several commenters saw their meat-based consumption habits as a form of gastronomic citizenship. Their newfound refusal to eat at Cracker Barrel in response to the Impossible Sausage “cast a vote” against progressivism and for Cracker Barrel’s rightful traditions. Steve Halstead writes:

SADLY YOU HAVE JUST LOST A CUSTOMER. FAKE MEAT, WHAT IS NEXT, FAKE EGGS, MAYBE FAKE SERVICE. STICK TO BEING THE COUNTRY RESTAURANT WE ALL LOVED SINCE YOU BEGAN YOUR CHAIN. I VOTE WITH MY FEET..... JUST SPENDING MY MONEY IN YOUR RESTAURANTS IS MY CHOICE, SEE Ya’ll.¹¹⁹

Steve’s vote against Cracker Barrel is motivated by a fear that Cracker Barrel itself, not just the food it serves, has become “fake.” Chip Tolleson left a similar comment bemoaning the loss of “realness” that the Impossible Sausage engendered, “You used to serve REAL things: Real butter Real meat Real smiles Real good food. Now you want to add in FAKE sausage. Bye bye old friend. When you get rid of the imitation sausage, I would like to come back. Until then, good bye.”¹²⁰ In his post, Chip connected animal-sourced foods to his sense of community, suggesting that improper foods threatened the basis of Cracker Barrel patrons’ communal identity. For Chip and Steve, Cracker Barrel was a unique space for “real” people to bond in a “real way.” Parasecoli suggested this sense of realness—both in food and relation—is often beholden to a “hegemony of common sense,” which fosters “a sense of unity among the ‘real people’ who recognize themselves as part of the same community” in contrast to people marked as outsiders.¹²¹ As a result, certain alterations to Cracker Barrel’s menu (or other potential new patrons) were not representative of the “real” Cracker Barrel.

Stokes and Atkins-Sayre argue that Southern cuisine and identity are not monolithic but diverse and in flux—as different regions have disagreements about the “proper” constitution of a dish. As Southern cuisine is subject to a “variety of interpretations,” updates and changes to recipes are common, as in the creation of healthier soul food dishes during the civil rights movement to address health concerns that disproportionately affected black people.¹²² Gastronativist appeals to tradition, however, require straightening messy histories into simplistic, black-and-white narratives as “historical facts may be taken out of context and shaped into narratives that establish clear, direct,

and unchanging links.”¹²³ Building on “nostalgia for good old days that may have never existed,” gastronativist appeals to imagined traditions—as in claims that Cracker Barrel had abandoned its “traditional values” and “country roots”—reassert a claim to a Southern country identity and cooking desirable for others to see.¹²⁴

Denying the flux and diversity of Southern identity (and Southern cuisine), the Cracker Barrel synecdoche acts as a sacred space for a right-wing political worldview—the home of what some commenters referred to as “real Americans.” Despite declaring itself a Southern country worldview, this perspective had little to do with the actual history of Southern gastronomy. As Parasecoli argues, “traditions and heritage acquire greater ideological meaning and emotional weight when current customs are attributed a long history that they may not actually have.”¹²⁵ A core battleground in this construction of selective cuisine heritages has been digital platforms, especially social media sites, that draw on mimetic images of and about food that can be reposted easily.¹²⁶ Parasecoli notes a swell of unchoreographed gastronativist demonstrations on social media sites—reactive TikToks, quick tweets, and angry YouTube videos. As such, backlashes like Cracker Barrel’s Impossible Sausage debacle emerge as mass-disseminated symbols, and social realities clash in online spheres.

Rather than dismiss the social media backlash to Cracker Barrel’s minor menu addition as absurd or incoherent, we suggest that Cracker Barrel represents a broader social reality, acting as what Moore calls a “one-term summation of a political orientation in synecdochal form.”¹²⁷ As a synecdoche for various aspects of a traditional conservative Southern identity under attack, Cracker Barrel functions as a *reduction* of Southern identity—much as Moore notes that the cigarette synecdoche constrained the general liberty of American citizens to the simple act of smoking. As “the act of perception and the thing perceived are ‘representative’ of each other,” Southern cuisine and identity are bound within the limits of the Cracker Barrel synecdoche, reduced to controversy over a plant-based option.¹²⁸ Gastronativist rhetoric limits access to a perceived community identity and history, which lends itself to frozen and essentialist accounts of Southern identity, and views any change as an absolute threat. The addition of an Impossible Sausage shifts a minor menu update into an existential attack on the core values inherent to the idea of Cracker Barrel. This shift explains the seemingly outlandish connections drawn by commenters—namely, that Cracker Barrel’s adoption of Impossible Sausage equates to a vote for Joseph Biden and that the inclusion of plant-based alternatives dissolved the chain’s claims to Southern authenticity.

We now turn to the descriptions of those imagined attackers, who have their own one-term summation: the Woke Sausage.

SYNECDOCHIC SAUSAGE: "OTHERS" COMING IN

Opposite Cracker Barrel, the Impossible Sausage serves a corollary synecdochic function, standing in for countercultures threatening to "invade" Cracker Barrel—a cabal of global elites, radical environmentalists, transgender people, and other "woke" populations. The Impossible Sausage synecdoche mimics the rhetorical style that Paul Elliot Johnson locates in Donald Trump's demagoguery, a rhetoric of white masculine victimhood. According to Johnson, Trump's rhetorical form disavows the structural power afforded to white men by affirming declarations that they are the ones under attack by those in power. This framework is a useful descriptor for rhetorical choices that authorize "subjects to deny white masculinity's central role in structuring society"—even if adherents are not themselves white men.¹²⁹ Rhetorician Casey Kelly characterizes this rhetorical genre as one of *ressentiment*—a moralizing framework that takes victimization and righteous revenge as "civic virtues" to sustain "the affective charge of detraction and revenge."¹³⁰ In the backlash against Cracker Barrel, this resentment-filled rhetoric of victimhood bound together seemingly inconsequential shifts in menu options with a perceived exteriority to power and righteous feelings of anger.

Media coverage of Cracker Barrel's menu change approached commenters' sentiments with bemusement or irony. *Insider* journalists were "confused why some were so angry about a sausage."¹³¹ Comments on Cracker Barrel's Facebook post poked fun at the incoherent reasons for the backlash, as in a comment that had been liked over 6,000 times, "The fact that you sell stuff other than crackers in barrels is why I'll never go here again!!!!"¹³² However, we suggest that these bemused reactions miss the rhetorical function of incomprehensibility in gastronativist backlash. For Johnson, "pundits who labeled Trump's arguments incoherent missed the significance of their form, for their seeming incoherence is intrinsic to contemporary white masculinity."¹³³ Gastronativist reactions allowed upset customers to channel their anger into "a language of victimization and suffering," providing a sense of agency and empowerment.¹³⁴

The apparent disconnect between an additional menu option and a broader attack on conservative values is a core aspect of the victimhood style. That

others could not understand patrons' intuitive connections between Impossible Sausage and wokeness provided evidence for irate Cracker Barrel fans that patrons commenting were being marginalized and rendered voiceless. In the words of commenter Sandy Malone, "727 replies be cause I said it wasn't going to happen that I wasn't going to go to Cracker Barrel to eat PLANT BASED SAUSAGE! DIDNT KNOW SO MANY NUTS ATE THERE! AND WHY DO THEY CARE IF I DONT EAT AT CRACKER BARREL!"¹³⁵ Providing a "link between emotions, ideology, and collective identity," gastronativism enjoins a general sense of unease with a self-righteous digital victimhood.¹³⁶ Commenters like Sandy argued they were under attack both by the Impossible Sausage *and* by people disagreeing with their online criticisms. Lolita Farnsworth declared, "a person can make fun if they like.. that's to your detriment."¹³⁷ For her, pro-Impossible Sausage comments mocking her outrage was evidence of the public's "cognitive dissonance" as well as a refusal to engage with "the research" of Bill Gates's human experiments with Impossible Sausage.¹³⁸ Robyn Galloway questioned whether the Impossible Sausage was poisonous and suggested that the viral thread revealed who was "delusional and easily manipulated."¹³⁹ James Satterlee took the entire Facebook thread as evidence that conservative perspectives were marginalized by people who "think we're stupid!" and want to "try to fool us!"¹⁴⁰

The paranoid belief that liberals, Cracker Barrel, and Impossible Foods were somehow weaponizing plant-based foods and controlling Facebook comments tapped into a broader fear of elites. Commenters' gastronativist rhetoric of victimhood paired with conspiratorial mindsets "fixated on dark plots and evil schemes, allegedly organized by small groups of corrupt and powerful people . . . whose identities remain secret."¹⁴¹ For upset patrons, a plant-based protein option at Cracker Barrel acts as a synecdoche for genetic manipulation or population control by elites such as Anthony Fauci, George Soros, or Bill Gates. Lolita Farnsworth accused Bill Gates and his "cohort" of using "unaware humans as Guinea pigs" to "push their personal ideal of world social experimentation" through Impossible's plant-based products. Other protestors refused to refer to Impossible Sausage by its name, like Catherine Witt calling it the "Bill Gates sausage" or Amber Ivy calling it the "5G sausage."¹⁴² On Instagram, @kristenfpilon described the Impossible Sausage addition as the first "slow introduction" of a plan by "globalists" to "wipe out real meat" and eventually bring in "bug burgers"¹⁴³—a far-right conspiracy theory claiming that global elites would force citizens to consume a diet of bugs and sewage, while retaining animal-products for themselves.¹⁴⁴

Other protestors argued that the Impossible Sausage would poison and sicken customers due to the products' inherent impurity. For example, Michael Butler declared the name "impossible" was appropriate as "it's impossible for that crap to be good for you. Highly processed foods are killing us."¹⁴⁵ Mike Spinak argued that Impossible sausage may "look and taste somewhat like meat, but it's synthetic junk food from a factory" with only "highly processed ingredients, and no actual normal food in it."¹⁴⁶ James Satterlee claimed that only "processing" and "deadly chemicals" could make plants taste like sausage, which would cause disease.¹⁴⁷ Robyn Galloway alluded to "chemicals and fillers" and Chris Watts warned of excessive "chemical processes" to make plants taste like meat.¹⁴⁸ Impossible sausages were framed as part of a larger campaign to poison the U.S. American populace with unnamed chemicals and additives.

For critics of Cracker Barrel's menu addition, the Impossible Sausage synecdoche represented malicious characters, blurring health and ecological concerns with exclusionary attitudes. For instance, on Instagram, @unapologetic_autist_v2 commented, "I for one support poisoning vegans with disgusting meat alternatives," while @jmeandluke declared, "no thanks" to "poisoned soy."¹⁴⁹ Others like @etcgl warned that the salt content in Impossible meat is intended to "kill people with high blood pressure," while @jmj_75_83 listed the Impossible Sausage's ingredients and asked how much money exchanged hands to get its "soybean slop" on the menu.¹⁵⁰ The sausage synecdoche calls upon fears of highly processed foods while situating those concerns within larger claims to victimhood, as healthy animal-consuming elites were the ones seeking to poison Cracker Barrel's patrons.

Alongside health-based conspiratorial claims, several commenters feared the Impossible Sausage represents "woke" ideology. In the social media backlash, "woke" is rarely defined, but protestors repeatedly make remarks about "Woke Meat" and claim that Cracker Barrel had gone "woke." As a "Woke" Sausage, the Impossible Sausage acts as synecdoche for general concern about issues of systemic injustice, like racial violence, LGBTQIA+ discrimination, environmentalism and more. As such, the presence of Impossible Sausage on the Cracker Barrel menu is described as a moral intrusion—demanding that patrons change to a progressive worldview. On Instagram, @alanb3977 argued, "No one wants fake meat! U idiots only grren environmental kooks may want that but the majority of us don't. You woke insane democrats make america sick."¹⁵¹ Framed as an imposition onto Cracker Barrel's patrons, the Impossible Sausage functions for @alanb3977 as an entryway for democratic

policies and environmentalism, which presumably will also make Cracker Barrel “sick” like America. @alanb3977 does not need to specify the connection between Impossible Sausage and environmentalism or the Democratic party for the sentence to convey its intended meaning—the Impossible Sausage synecdoche already encapsulates those viewpoints.

Gastronativist rhetoric merges concerns about food’s toxicity with fears of new, even strange foodstuffs. These feelings of uncertainty or disgust quickly are translated into a sense of threat.¹⁵² Gastronativism encounters difference through a language of “danger” which ensures that “coexistence is impossible” with identified outsiders.¹⁵³ The metaphors of infection and contagion link social phenomena. The risk becomes that seemingly minor intrusions, like a new menu item, will exponentially multiply throughout the social body.¹⁵⁴

The Impossible Sausage synecdoche also evokes attempts to undercut hegemonic masculinity and “traditional” gender norms. Rogers finds that environmentalist and animal rights movements are described as a threat to hegemonic masculinity, where meat consumption is associated with being a “real man,” but consumption of vegetables or tofu has a feminizing force.¹⁵⁵ Prevalent in patrons’ characterizations of plant-based meats as “soy,” the trope, due to its phytoestrogen content, has become a symbol for a “woke” feminized or queer subject.¹⁵⁶ Thus, Impossible Sausage acts as a stand-in not only for femininity but also as a threat to biologically essentialist accounts of sex and gender. For example, on Cracker Barrel’s Facebook post, Ed O’Neill analogized Impossible Sausage to transgender claims to self-identity, writing that “just like ‘transgender,’ call it what you want but . . . well you know.”¹⁵⁷ Ryan Nelson made a similar comparison, asking if anyone knew “if they have LGBTQ meats?”¹⁵⁸ @marcelbell wrote that the Impossible Sausage would be “attracting the soy boys,” a term for an effeminate or queer man.¹⁵⁹ On Cracker Barrel’s Instagram post, @e_mott sarcastically described several of these interconnected themes in the Impossible Sausage synecdoche:

Me and my trans boyfriend love coming to Cracker Barrel! We sit on your rocking chairs for hours and hours watching all the big big pick up trucks park and then we sit at tables all morning reading the Wall Street Journal and cnn articles on our phones! Playing the golf tee puzzle game makes us feel so at home because who doesn’t love getting pegged! Now I love you guys even more since I know I no longer need to be terrified I might accidentally ingest red meat or pork. Or god forbid gluten! Could you imagine?! Anyways. Thank you for making your restaurant an inclusive safe space.¹⁶⁰

For @e_mott (although likely trolling), the Impossible Sausage represents an amalgam of liberal news sources, vegetarianism, gluten-free diets, and trans kinships. This general mass of “wokeness” threatened to reshape Cracker Barrel’s clientele from cis-heteronormative, strong conservative customers, into liberal, wimpy queer and/or trans patrons that consume liberal media and have an irrational fear of consuming gluten. Such commenters feared that that Cracker Barrel would become a transgender-friendly space. To do so would defy traditional norms of hegemonic masculinity, biological essentialism, and other conservative representations of sex and gender.

Viewing Cracker Barrel and the Impossible Sausage as a gastronativist synecdoche illuminates how patrons discursively enacted the feelings of powerlessness and impotence associated with white masculine victimhood. Protestors frame exclusion and revenge as civic virtues in response to the threat that Others pose to their threatened Cracker Barrel community. Parasecoli argues, the “defense of one’s community against both internal and external perceived menaces requires the condemnation and at times, the legal, physical or metaphorical exclusion of those who do not belong.”¹⁶¹ The backlash to Cracker Barrel’s introduction of Impossible Sausage represents attempts by online commenters to re-assert an identity seemingly threatened by expansive readings of food. For them, Cracker Barrel was a space properly defined by conservative values both in food and in life. In this way, the patrons revolting against Cracker Barrel were not simply reacting to a plant-based option. Rather, they utilized the Impossible Sausage as a rhetorical exigence through which to define the limits of identity claims to Cracker Barrel patron-hood and gastronomic citizenship.

CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

As food acts as an “emotional anchor” for political radicalization, scholars must consider gastronativist backlash and approach meat/meat alternatives as ideologically-charged symbols, not just products—with the goal of finding ways to transform food-symbols into a “tool for deradicalization.”¹⁶² We argue that Cracker Barrel and Impossible Sausage act as synecdoches for opposing social realities—a circumscribed Southern identity defined by a white right-wing cis-normative masculinity against a contagious invasion of woke Others that threatens to upend gender and political norms through moral corruption.

Previous scholarship has examined how Southern identity is narrated and performed through food—as a vehicle for both inclusion and exclusion. As a supplement to this work, we offer Parasecoli's gastronativism as a framework that offers insight into this process. First, gastronativism centralizes the importance of digital networks to gastronomic belonging. Although vehement disagreement about unfamiliar cuisine is not a new phenomenon, our analysis suggests that globalization and increasing dominance of social media platforms has heightened digital antagonism over food, acquiring “a prominence in the public sphere and an acrimony in tones that set them apart from similar occurrences in the past.”¹⁶³ Our work serves as a model for how digital gastronativism can distinguish communication practices from in-person food protests, which has been the locus of gastronomic study. Similarly, commentators argue that leaving social media comments amounted to “voting”—a form of civic participation as citizen-patrons of Cracker Barrel.¹⁶⁴ We demonstrate how communication scholars might assess the relationship between gastronomic group cohesion and narratives of exclusion. Our analysis suggests that cohesion and exclusion are intertwined for the social media commentators examined here—as it is the exclusion of gastronomic Others (who would eat Impossible Sausage) that binds together gastronativist insiders as the “real” Cracker Barrel fans (who eat “real” meat).

Gastronativist rhetoric is adaptable to varied contexts and food items, making it an imperative analytic for communication critics. Previous work has connected the consumption of animal products to beliefs supporting the privilege of white citizenship, far-right ideology, and hegemonic masculinity. Our analysis finds that issues prevalent to today—like culture wars over transgender rights or conspiratorial beliefs about political figures like Bill Gates—were grafted onto the Impossible Sausage, complementing the association of vegan proteins with femininity or left-wing beliefs. Animal-sourced and plant-sourced meats are powerful condensation symbols that can stretch to accommodate and organize emerging political contexts into existing gastropolitical orders. Although synecdoche long has been understood as reflecting differing social realities on either side of a conflict, that the Impossible Sausage represents seemingly unrelated ideological conflicts indicates that gastronativist rhetoric encourages issue linkages that shift identity through food. Environmentalism, conspiracies about elite control, right-wing political beliefs, and hegemonic understandings of gender and sex were tied to the death of animals for meat products and the creation of non-animal-based proteins. We offer a framework for future works to examine other types of

gastronautivist linkages for different food products, particularly innovative plant-based meat alternatives. Put simply, dichotomies between plant-based and flesh-based meats are intimately intertwined in broader ideological battles over U.S. American identity.

Victimhood narratives are also central to gastronativist rhetoric, wherein Cracker Barrel being under attack is really a fear that white, cis-heteronormative conservative men and favored stories of Southern country tradition are under attack, thus justifying feelings of righteous anger and intense digital backlash. In the Cracker Barrel case, patrons drew on a perceived exteriority to cultural or political power to justify a zero-sum approach to plant-based foods—such that the mere option of a vegan alternative represented an existential challenge to what they saw as Cracker Barrel’s values. Emphasizing the centrality of victimhood narratives explains seemingly incoherent moments of gastronativist backlash, as online commentators used Cracker Barrel’s plant-based breakfast option as proof of the rhetorical marginalization by woke elites. As gastronativist backlash intensifies and grows more prominent on online platforms, laypeople and scholars alike must examine the ideological and material functions of plant-based meat alternatives. In an era of growing fascism, catastrophic climate change, and online disinformation campaigns, even the tiniest, tastiest plant-based patty carries political weight. Impossible sausages may *taste* the same as the “real” thing, but they *mean* something completely different.

NOTES

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