

The Cultural History of a Break: Spring Break in the Florida Panhandle, 1938-2018

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Part harmonic convergence, the result of millions of teenagers coming of age in a time of rebellion and affluence, and part harmonic convergence, a coming of age in a society saturated with sexual images, the Florida beach perfectly matched generation and lifestyles. Fort Lauderdale, Daytona Beach, and Panama City Beach were reinvented to fit an American rite of passage.

—G. R. Mormino (2005: 316)

Introduction

In its simplest form, Spring Break is nothing more than a week-long vacation period, typically held in the early spring, recognized as such by administrators of colleges and universities across North America, and providing a respite from classes, exams, and the cold weather. But spring break is also a multi-billion-dollar tourism phenomenon that encompasses the yearly migration of thousands of college students towards a small number of sunny beaches in the Southern United States, chief among them Florida. Spring break is generally associated with the consumption of alcohol in excess, reckless behavior, and a relaxation of sexual mores, in a no-holds-barred atmosphere of unlicensed leisure, or what the *New York Times* dubbed “Spring Bacchanal” (Marsh 2006). More than forty scholarly articles (for a review, see Ribeiro and Hickerson 2012), and encyclopedia entries (Gianoulis 2000, Ribeiro and Hickerson 2017, Russell 2004) have been published on the topic, in addition to thousands of media pieces, news articles, op-eds, and reports by advocacy and interest groups. Novels, films, television shows, and even a handful of master’s theses and doctoral dissertations have been devoted to spring break. In college campuses across the Eastern United States, spring break is a daily

topic of conversation during the gloomy February months leading up to it, and the talk of many who recount their experiences for weeks afterwards.

My interest in spring break started with a research article that looked at Canadian spring breakers' behavior in Daytona Beach, Florida (Maticka-Tyndale et al. 1998). The authors argued that spring break constituted a liminal space (from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold, i.e., a time/space outside “ordinary” being and experience, implying a reversal of social roles and rules, and often heralding a new status for those who had experienced it – see Turner 1974 1987). I was intrigued by Maticka-Tyndale et al.'s (1998) description of spring break and their suggestion that spring break might constitute a rite of passage (Van Gennep 1961) for North American college students, and decided to write a research proposal to investigate if such hypothesis could be corroborated through ethnographic inquiry. Then I came across Nathaniel Welch's photographic volume *Spring Broke* (2004), which showed the less glamorous side of spring break, and my interest in this phenomenon deepened.

I began conducting research about spring break in the Florida Panhandle in 2007. This initial foray into a uniquely American phenomenon with a Floridian genesis ended up being the topic of both my Master Thesis (Ribeiro 2008) and my Doctoral Dissertation (Ribeiro 2011). My early data collection efforts in 2007 interviewing spring breakers before and after their spring break experiences were also the start of a 10-year longitudinal mixed-methods study on spring break in the Florida Panhandle, with a special focus on Panama City Beach (e.g., Ribeiro 2012, Ribeiro and Chick 2018, Ribeiro and Yarnal 2008). The latest wave of data was collected in the spring of 2019, in the aftermath of Hurricane Michael, a Category 5 Storm which made landfall in the Florida Panhandle in October 2018, with tragic consequences for local Floridians, and that effectively brought tourism delivery and development in the region to a standstill (Associated Press 2019).

In the pages that follow I present a brief summary of the cultural history of spring break in the Florida Panhandle, focusing particularly in Panama City Beach. I have also attempted to provide some ethnographic detail of what typically occurs(ed) every year during the spring break period (March-April) in what was once dubbed “America's Spring Break Mecca” (McMurtrie

1997), contrasting ethnographic evidence with extant spring break literature. I conclude by offering some future reflections on this fascinating phenomenon that has impacted the Florida Panhandle for more than twenty years.

The History of a Break

There is little reliable historical evidence concerning the origins of spring break. For certain, we know only that in 1935 Colgate University's Swimming Team traveled from Hamilton, New York to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to take advantage of the first outdoor Olympic-sized swimming pool in the Southern States (the Casino Pool) built in 1928. In 1938, Fort Lauderdale hosted the College Coaches' Swim Forum, which attracted many collegiate swimming teams from across the United States and increasing numbers of college students (Gianoulis 2000). In the 1950s, Northwestern Florida received large numbers of high school students during "AEA Week" (Alabama Education Association) and "GEA Week" (Georgia Education Association) in early March during which no classes were held. Local authorities and businesses were quick to perceive the potential profits to be derived from these annual spring migrations of students towards Florida and, in 1953, civic leaders of Fort Lauderdale extended an "open invitation" to college students from all over the country to come and spend spring break in their city (George 1991, Hollis 2004, Josiam et al. 1998, Smeaton et al. 1998).

In 1959, *Time Magazine* published a story on the "20,000 spring-vacationing collegians who began taking over the town" of Fort Lauderdale ("Beer and the beach" 1959). The *Time* article portrayed spring break as a ritual and ended with the answer of a young collegian girl to the question of why she had travelled to Fort Lauderdale: "Because that's where the boys are". The following year, a novel entitled *Where the boys are* (Swarthout 1960), provided a humorous outlook on spring break (with spring breakers ending up running guns to Cuba to support Fidel Castro's revolutionary efforts), and the famous homonymous movie, starring Connie Francis and Paula Prentiss, followed only a few months later (Pasternak and Levin 1960). In 1961 Fort Lauderdale received 50,000 spring breakers, and Daytona Beach welcomed over 100,000 in the late 1960s (Gerlach 1989, Gianoulis 2000).

The Culture of Spring Break

The 1980s witnessed not only the release of the film *Spring Break* (Smilow and Cunningham 1983), but also the first broadcast of Music Television's (MTV) annual *MTV Spring Break* live from Daytona Beach in 1986, starting a media ritual that endures until today. In 1984, an unsuccessful remake of the movie *Where the Boys Are*, unoriginally titled *Where the Boys Are '84* (Carr and Haverback 1984), was released to little commercial and critical acclaim. In the mid-1980s South Padre Island, Texas received over 150,000 spring breakers and Daytona Beach 400,000 (Gerlach 1989, Woodbury 1987). Fort Lauderdale had reached its peak capacity (350,000 college students in 1985), and was beginning to question whether the marked increase in revenue and tax collections during spring break was enough to offset spring break's negative impacts "following public complaints and concerns about too many students and their unlawful activities while on vacation" (George 1991: 5).

By 1989, due to a number of measures enacted by local officials tired of the spring breakers' antics, Fort Lauderdale had successfully reduced spring breakers' numbers to a mere 20,000. Nevertheless, overall spring break numbers continued to increase, and spring break hotspots now included Daytona Beach, Miami, and Panama City Beach in Florida; Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; South Padre Island, Texas; and San Diego and Palm Springs in California (Appleford 2004, Gianoulis 2000, Moredock 2003). Of note is also the establishment in the early 1980s of College Expo America in Daytona Beach, which remains to this day the largest consumer fair that specifically targets young adults and college students (Gonzalez 1986). By now, spring break was unquestionably "part of Florida's cultural history" (Wooldrige 2007), heavily contributing to this state's economic dependency on tourism (Gannon 2003, Moore 2003, Mormino 2005).

The 1990s saw the rise of Panama City Beach as the spring break capital of the United States, with *MTV's Spring Break* annual broadcast playing a crucial role in its rising popularity (Colon et al. 2001). The number of spring break destinations increased steadily in the 1990s, due to an increasingly fragmented student travel market. Whilst reportedly 1.5 million college students travelled yearly during their spring break vacations in the 1990s, the number of spring breakers visiting non-traditional spring break hotspots and shunning the typical fun-in-the-sun spring break also grew. Furthermore, new

spring break vacation spots included destinations outside the United States, such as Cancun and Acapulco in Mexico; the Bahamas in the Caribbean; and Europe (Bai et al. 2004, Gianoulis 2000).

Four distinct factors contributed to this changing trend. First, a number of spring break hotspots such as Palm Springs, Daytona Beach and Fort Lauderdale, among others, implemented strict measures to dissuade spring breakers from visiting, in the hopes of attracting the far more lucrative market of families and retirees. Second, media outlets such as MTV and CBS News dramatically increased their coverage of the spring break phenomenon in the 1990s, featuring a number of overseas spring break destinations, such as Cancun. The first volume of the infamously popular film series *Girls Gone Wild* was also released in this period. Third, as Gianoulis (2000: 489) points out, “A sharpened awareness of the problems of alcoholism (...) resulted in a marked decrease in the glorification of drink at resort destinations.” Consequently, spring breakers travelled to other destinations, such as Mexico, where drinking restrictions were either less prevalent or not so strictly enforced (“Gimme a break” 2000, Lange et al. 2002). The fourth and final factor was the increased popularity of “alternative” spring break programs (Collison 1989, Nealy 2006), whereby college students choose to spend their spring break vacations performing some form of voluntary community service (Healy 2005, Ivory 1997, McElhaney 1998, Rhoads and Neururer 1998).

The 2000s registered not only a marked decrease in overall spring break numbers (Guess 2008), but also a steep increase in the marketing efforts of several spring break-dependent companies, now competing more aggressively for an increasingly smaller college student market (Barbaro 2003, Trigaux 2005). Furthermore, the well-publicized releases of spring break-related motion pictures, such as *MTV Spring Break* (DeMaio et al. 2001) and *The Real Cancun* (de Oliveira 2003), consolidated the marketing appeal of overseas destinations such as Cancun and Acapulco in Mexico, and Negril and Montego Bay in Jamaica as spring break hotspots. Spring break trips to Europe have also become increasingly popular, further contributing to diminish the number of visitors to domestic spring break destinations (Clark 2010). Nevertheless, the United States spring break market was still a

profitable one in the early 2000s, with reported spring break expenditures of \$1 billion in 2003 in Florida and Texas alone (Porter 2003, Reynolds 2004).

Spring break in Panama City Beach nonetheless saw its spring break numbers (in visitors and expenditures) climb steadily for next few years (Vasquez 2016). As many as 500,000 spring breakers were estimated to visit Panama City Beach every year during spring break, spending an estimated US\$100 million, which the local economy sorely needed (Hamilton 2014). It should be noted that as recently as 2019, it was reported that 45% of the county's sales tax came from the beach (McCresless 2019). Surges in crime and other negative social outcomes derived from the presence of a large contingent of young people drinking vast quantities of alcohol in a small geographic location routinely aroused the anger of local inhabitants and some public officials, sometimes leading to efforts to curb spring break behavior or make it more "family-friendly." However, spring break's economic impact(s) proved time and time again to be an overriding argument, and any official attempts to reduce college students' presence during spring break in Panama City Beach, when they were attempted, were quickly reversed in the following year(s) (Henderson and Jackson 2018).

In 2015, however, a tragic event occurred that overwhelmingly changed the city's attitudes towards spring break overnight. In March 2015, in broad daylight and amidst thousands of spring breakers partying at the beach, a unconscious 19-year old woman was sexually assaulted by at least three males, who were allegedly encouraged by the victim's boyfriend (two of the men, later found to be undergraduate students at Troy University in Alabama, were sentenced in 2016 to 10 years in prison). Onlookers did nothing, and several video recordings of the incident emerged soon after. The event caught the attention of national and international media and prompted emergency responses from local officials. The previous month a shooting in Panama City Beach at a house party had left several persons injured, many of them spring breakers. Arrests for drug-related charges had also increased fivefold increased the previous year. Following a series of contentious emergency Council meetings, consumption of alcohol on the beach was banned, effective immediately, and a series of other restrictive ordinances were enacted (Baumgarten 2016, Quimby, 2016, Murgatroyd et al. 2015). Bay County Commissioner Mike Thomas declared that "Spring break as we

know it is over. It can't stay if this is what it wants to be (...) The people that enjoy participating in spring break have acted in such a way that they can't stay here any longer" (Murgatroyd et al. 2015).

From 2015 onwards, Panama City Beach followed in the footsteps of Fort Lauderdale and Daytona Beach, vowing to get rid of spring breakers forever. Mike Thomas was elected City Mayor on a "enough is enough" platform that aimed at remarketing Panama City Beach as a all-year round family-oriented tourism destination (Garman 2016). Barring a few hiccups, such efforts have by and large been successful (Henderson and Jackson 2018, Monahan and Griggs 2019, Morgan 2018).

"The Best-Kept Secret in the Panhandle" – The Making of a Tourism Destination

Tucked away in the Florida Panhandle between St. Andrew's Bay to the Southeast and Laguna Beach to the Northwest, roughly 90 miles from Pensacola and 100 miles from Tallahassee, sits Panama City Beach, a city inhabited by approximately 13,000 people (United States Census Bureau 2018). Little more than undeveloped pineland for use of the St. Joe Paper Company – now the St. Joe Company, the largest private land owner in the state of Florida (Ziewitz and Wiaz 2004), Panama City Beach saw some early tourist development in the 1930s with the construction of a hotel and some tourist cottages by Gideon Thomas, an early Panhandle entrepreneur (Hollis 2004). Thomas, whose name now graces one of the most important arteries in Panama City Beach (Thomas Drive), named his small tourist enclave "Panama City Beach", which officially opened its doors to the public in May 2, 1936. Completion of the "old" Hathaway Bridge in 1959 (the "new" Hathaway Bridge was built in 2003) linking Panama City Beach with the larger Panama City and Highway 98 provided easier access to what another early Panama City Beach tourism impresario, J. E. Churchwell, called "The World's Most Beautiful Beaches" (Hollis 2004: 26), a moniker which endured until today.

This area has indeed some of the finest beaches in the continental United States, that compare handsomely with the beaches in Hawaii and the Florida

Keys, with almost nine miles of uninterrupted white sand stretching from Lower Grand Lagoon to Laguna Beach, bordering an emerald green sea that makes for an idyllic postcard-perfect tourism destination. Panama City Beach is part of a more extensive coastal area, extending from St. Andrew Bay to Pensacola, mostly dedicated to tourism development and known, alternatively, by the designations of “Redneck Riviera,” “Emerald Coast,” and “Miracle Strip” (Bouler 2007, Hollis 2004, Mormino 2005).

Until the construction of the “old” Hathaway Bridge linking “the beaches” to Panama City, this area was unknown but for a few fishermen and a handful of locals (Womack 1998). The Redneck Riviera was the almost exclusive playground of those who knew it was there and knew how to get to it. Tracey, a 38-year old real estate agent from Dayton, Ohio, now waitressing part-time at a beach-side bar and café told me that there was “nothing here before the 70s. It was the best kept secret of the Panhandle. Only locals came here to go to the beach or [to] go fishing (...) Then they started building those condos...until the bottom fell out.” Tracey moved to Panama City Beach, where she owned a vacation home, with her 22-year old daughter after the real estate bust of the 2000s. “I came here when Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac went belly up.” “Did you lose a lot?” – I asked. “Everything.” We talked of corporate shenanigans, and how the corporate world forgives them as long as “your numbers are good”, as hers were. But it all came crashing down, said Tracey: “Yup, I just opened the doors to my place and sold everything inside, furniture, paintings on the wall, everything. And then we moved down here.” Tracey’s story is not unique as much of the population of Panama City Beach comes from elsewhere, mostly from the neighboring states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, attracted by prospects of seasonal employment, balmy weather, and affordable cost of living. More recently (2012-onwards), large numbers of legal and illegal immigrants from Latin America and Eastern Europe have arrived in Panama City Beach hoping to find employment in the area, especially during the spring and summer months. Recent political developments after the 2016 United States Presidential election have forced this immigrant population, especially those from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and other Latin American countries, away from Bay County and towards large urban centers such as Pensacola, Miami, or New Orleans, where they are more likely to find employment.

In addition to labor, much of the capital owners who invested in Panama City Beach, as they did in most of the Panhandle, originated from business interests in other Southern states such as Alabama and Georgia, which also provided part of the tourist demand that would beget the spring break phenomenon in Panama City Beach (Hollis 2004, Mormino 2005, Smith 2004, Wynne and Moorhead 2010, Womack 1998). For instance, Charlie Hilton, owner of several hotels in Panama City Beach that cater to the spring break clientele and “one of the most powerful and influential men in the Panhandle” was born in Helena, Georgia, and moved to Panama City Beach in the early 1940s (Dixon 2008).

To satisfy the booming tourism demand, a few small independently owned motels and hotels sprung up along the coast of Panama City Beach in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as numerous beachfront bars, beach apparel stores, liquor stores, diners, tattoo parlors, arcades, restaurants, and amusement parks. Some of these establishments still exist today, but most were replaced by enormous beach front hotels and condominiums, built during the height of the real estate market in the 1980s (Mormino 2005). Ownership of property in the then called “Redneck Riviera” along the Gulf Coast proved to be a better investment than stock portfolios in the 1980s and 1990s, and demand from aging Baby Boomers from neighboring Georgia and Alabama quickly fueled property speculation in Panama City Beach. Increased demand coupled with low interest rates and little regulatory oversight over mortgage practices led to a dynamic trade in condominium property in Panama City Beach, which in turn led to even greater construction (Colburn and deHaven-Smith 2002, Jackson 2010; see also Tett 2009).

Subsequent financial crises in the United States from the late 1980s (e.g., 1987’s Black Monday, early 1990s recession, dot-com bubble of 2000-2002, 2007-2009 financial crisis, subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-2010) to the early 2010s, coupled with a succession of natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Ivan in 2004, Hurricane Dennis in 2005, Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010, Hurricane Michael in 2018) saw a dramatic effect in the ownership of tourism-related property along the Florida Panhandle’s beachfront (Callan 2007, CBSMiami 2019, McVeigh 2012). Unable to meet their mortgage

payments, and with home values declining sharply since the late 2006, sometimes overnight, many of those who had bought condos and other property along the beach saw themselves selling them to financial institutions to settle their obligations. In turn, banks suddenly saw themselves in the Spring Break business, competing with the few companies that were large enough to have withstood the financial and natural storms. The last ten years have been marked by slow growth, with a recovering real estate market that has assisted in the development of a (new) tourism industry primarily catering to families from neighboring and Eastern states (Associated Press 2019, McCreless 2019). However, residual spring break activity in the Panhandle continues, even if fueled by nostalgia alone (Sweeney 2019).

Welcome to Panama City Beach

For 25 years (1990-2015), spring breakers' presence and impact in Panama City Beach followed roughly the same pattern. During the six to eight-week period that mediates between late February and Mid-April, literally hundreds of thousands of college undergraduates will descend upon the city, multiplying the number of inhabitants by a factor of 10 or more. Most spring breakers arrive by car, but significant numbers of spring breakers chose to buy cheap flights from budget airlines that have direct flights to the Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport, located 19 miles North of Panama City Beach.

The arrival of the spring breakers changes the physiognomy of Panama City Beach overnight. Long lines of cars feed ceaselessly into the town's main arteries, Thomas Drive and Front Beach Road, bringing carload after carload of spring breakers. Cars, trucks, vans, and SUVs bearing license plates from several states, but primarily from neighboring ones (e.g., Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and Tennessee) are almost bumper to bumper as they disgorge spring breakers into their respective hotels, motels, and condos. The spring breakers, still in clothes indicative of the weather in the states where they come from, can be seen everywhere, three and five to a car, unpacking in hotel and motel parking lots. The entire town acquires a festive atmosphere, and the procession of spring breaker-laden vehicles resembles a parade.

The first stop of the spring breakers is at their hotel or resort. There, they run the gauntlet of unloading their baggage, checking in, receiving the colorful wrist bracelets that allow them access to the property, and listening to the many brand ambassadors' spiels on why they should try this or that product, or why going to party X at club Z is a really good idea. For example, upon arrival at one of the largest Panama City Beach resorts that caters to the spring break crowd, spring breakers are made to stand in line for sometimes hours at a time, progressing slowly across a meandering path – delimited by several interlocked metal gates, similar to the ones used in rock concerts and political protests – that leads to the hotel front desk. While they wait, a hotel representative explains the rules: “No hanging out the balconies, or you’ll get arrested!” “No guests after 6:00pm unless they have a wristband!”

Several companies, advertising everything from liquor-based fruit drinks to “booze cruises” and VIP cards that grant access to several Panama City Beach nightclubs, have set up booths inside the hotel. Enormous cardboard containers with “swag” (i.e., corporate product samples), are routinely pillaged by the spring breakers, who seem to have a strange fascination with the acquisition of cheap plastic sunglasses, travel-sized sunscreen, razor blades (male and female), hand lotion, frisbees, t-shirts, and whatever else happens to be free of charge. The hotel also has its own bottle store, which is stacked high with cases of beer, advertised at prices only slightly higher than those you would find at a local grocery store. Among the advertisements for several brands of beer and the suggestion that using the services of an online reference service will greatly increase your odds of sexual gratification, a large white banner reads “Welcome to Panama City Beach.” Sat at a nearby table, occasionally listening to the two-way radio clipped to his right shoulder, a Panama City Beach police officer in a well-creased short-sleeved white uniform shirt looks on, bemused.

With two of their basic needs satisfied, spring breakers turn to more conspicuous consumption. During their stay in Panama City Beach, spring breakers will acquire a variety of objects that will undeniably establish their status as spring breakers, such as coolers, beer bongs (a contraption made by attaching a wide flexible plastic tube to a funnel through which beer is poured, allowing the user to “bong” the beer in a few seconds), beach balls,

beach chairs, beach towels, beads, footballs, frisbees, and other assorted beach paraphernalia. At the beach, such items are often given as prizes or as corporate promotional material. At the end of their stay, the vast majority of these items will be discarded by the spring breakers, left in their hotel rooms or thrown out of their car to the side of the road to make the trip back to campus more comfortable. Some items will make it to dorm rooms, and others will be kept as mementos of the fleeting glory won in a beer chugging contest.

I found the spring breakers' fascination with these soon-to-be-discarded, easily perishable goods difficult to understand. T-shirts were particularly sought-after items – when I interviewed an informant who had recently returned from a 'typical' spring break vacation in Daytona Beach, he made a point of telling me that one of the highlights of his vacation was winning a t-shirt in a beer chugging contest (Ribeiro 2008: 51). In Panama City Beach, the most highly prized items were those offered by the United States Army: black t-shirts of good manufacture and exceptionally high-quality cotton (Made in USA), with yellow-gold letters proclaiming that its user had "Conquered the Army Spring Break Challenge." Beads were also immensely popular in Panama City Beach, for the same reasons they are popular in New Orleans' Mardi Gras (Jankowiak and White 1999, Shrum and Kilburn 1996).

In *The World of Goods*, Mary Douglas claimed that goods serve as communication symbols used to proclaim one's allegiance to a set of cultural values and norms: "Consumption uses goods to make firm and visible a particular set of judgments in the fluid processes of classifying persons and events" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 67). Douglas also stressed that consumption of goods is a ritual activity, used both to hamper and enhance an individual's connection to a certain social group. I was unable to determine if that was the case for spring breakers. With the exception of beads and t-shirts, spring breakers attached little meaning to the many goods they specifically purchased or otherwise acquired during spring break. They kept the ones with obvious utilitarian value (e.g., towels, t-shirts, footballs, frisbees) and discarded the others. Yet their acquisition was an integral part of the spring break experience.

In case they did not bring it with them (which often happens if spring breakers come from neighboring states or are underage), spring breakers bought alcohol. The most common is by far beer, which is sold in enormous quantities, and always by the case. Most spring breakers are budget-conscious, allotting the most substantial part of their spring break budget towards cheap alcohol and cover charges at the local nightclubs (Josiam et al. 1994, 1998, 1999, Welch 2004, Wirtz et al. 2003). The biggest beneficiaries of such consumption are not only the beer manufacturers, but the distributors and wholesalers, especially national chain discount stores. Duly supplied, spring breakers schmear sunscreen on themselves, pack their coolers carefully, and head to the beach.

The convergence of sand and sea has always fascinated humans, and the beach has long been associated with relaxation, pleasure, and hedonism (Lenček and Bosker 1998). The beach has also been a place for conspicuous leisure (Veblen 1994), whereby access to a certain beach, or the performance of certain beach activities, denotes one's social status, notwithstanding the blurring of class and hierarchical positioning that occurs when one wears nothing but a swimsuit (Cohen 1984). Beaches and beach life are typically seen as the antithesis to the burdensome realities of modern urban existence (Cohen 1982, Edgerton 1979, Laurent 1973, Wagner 1977). Whereas some authors do not hesitate to qualify the beach as a liminal space, where beachgoers form an almost immediate *communitas* (Turner 1974, 1987) by virtue of their simultaneous presence in a space with fewer social restrictions and conducive to a relaxation of social mores (Wagner 1977; see also Turner 1969, 1977), others cast doubt on the properties of social cohesion afforded by sea and sand (Cohen 1984, Edgerton 1979, Ribeiro and Yarnal 2008).

Spring break activities in Panama City Beach's beach follow a well-structured and regular pattern. When spring breakers arrive at Panama City Beach's beach mid-morning (the beach is mostly deserted before 10:00am), carrying with them coolers of beer and other beach paraphernalia, they select an area that will remain for the most part unchanged during the remainder of their spring break vacation. Like most beach goers (Lenček and Bosker 1998, Kammler and Schernewski 2004), spring breakers are territorial, and choose their place on the beach in function of distance to

lodging (if staying at a beach hotel) and/or distance to a beach access (if not), distance to corporate areas, size of party (there are no individual spring breakers), and willingness to rent a beach chair.

On the beach, young people can be seen clustered in small groups, drinking, hanging out, sunbathing, talking, and generally having a good time. As the day progresses, so does the noise level. Thousands of spring breakers can be seen on the beach all the way west (towards the pier) and east (towards the LaVela nightclub). It is a boisterous crowd, but surprisingly there is little conflict. Beer cans, either empty, discarded on the beach, or full, in 24- and 30-can cartons being carried by spring breakers, can be seen everywhere. Other games are being played on the sand, also reminiscent of tailgating/drinking games, such as horseshoes and whiffle ball. Both the penalty and the reward in these games is the consumption of alcohol, evoking agonistic and vertigo gamesmanship (Caillois 2001). Another popular activity is simply walking along the beach and checking out what is going on. There is little or no between-group interaction, and what interaction exists seems to correlate highly with increased levels of alcohol consumption and with sheer physical proximity. Social interaction occurs in earnest only in locations designed for that purpose, such as bars, nightclubs, and/or hotels, or when enough alcohol has been consumed.

As the afternoon progresses, the mood among the spring breakers changes, particularly by the entrance to the La Vela and Spinnaker nightclubs. There, in the mid-afternoon, the roar is almost deafening. In a thin strip of sand, measuring no more than one hundred by forty feet, tightly sandwiched between the towering sea-view apartment complexes and the ocean, are many, many hundreds of spring breakers. They stand almost shoulder to shoulder in a solid wall of pink and ebony-colored flesh, shouting, flirting, hanging out, dancing, getting corporate swag, and doing their best to become seriously intoxicated.

In the distance, United States Army paratroopers jump from a low flying airplane and parachute slowly onto the beach, releasing red smoke from canisters in their boots before they touch the sand near an Army spring break booth which doubles as recruitment center, complete with video games, basketball and volleyball courts, punching bags, a sound stage, and a

mechanical bull. Just before sunset, another low flying airplane roars above the beach, dragging an advertisement banner for Natural Beers which reads: “N.I.L.F. = Natty I’d Like to Finish.” These and other marketing strategies (all you can drink wrist bracelets, ladies’ nights, teen nights, foam parties, happy hours, booze cruises) facilitate, intentionally or not, extremely high levels of intoxication among spring breakers within an extremely short time span, and are no doubt a contributing factor to the overall hedonistic atmosphere that is felt during spring break in Panama City Beach. In strikingly similar fashion to what occurs during a college football tailgate (Glassman et al. 2007), spring breakers begin drinking in the early morning, and it is not uncommon to find them intoxicated as early as 9:00am.

These findings lend credence to the extensive spring break research that has associated alcohol consumption with spring breakers’ excessive behaviors in typical spring break destinations (Apostolopoulos et al. 2002, Grekin et al. 2007, Josiam et al. 1994 1998 1999, Lee et al. 2006 2009, Maticka-Tyndale and Herold 1997 1999, Maticka-Tyndale et al. 1998, Mattila et al. 2001, Mewhinney et al. 1995, Mewhinney 1996, Neighbors et al. 2007, Smeaton et al. 1998, Sonmez et al. 2006, Wirtz et al. 2003). Nonetheless, I saw little activity, whether in type, frequency, or intensity, that could be interpreted as outside the norm of what usually occurs in large college towns throughout the United States at events such as football tailgates, homecoming rallies, bar crawls, or fraternity and sorority parties. My observations and fieldwork, after more than 10 years of research, have lent support to recent spring break research that argues that spring breakers’ behavior is but a continuation – albeit an exaggerated one – of practices they already engage in during the rest of the academic year (e.g., Litvin 2010, Ribeiro 2012, Ribeiro and Chick 2018, Ribeiro and Yarnal 2008).

Coda – The Death of Spring Break in the Panhandle?

Spring break has apparently left the Florida Panhandle for good and has mostly moved West to South Padre Island, Texas (Strzelecka 2015); and South to Puerto Rico, Mexico, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic (Cordero et al. 2011 2013, Duncan 2015, Monterrubio 2016, Monterrubio and Andriotis 2014, Monterrubio and Mendoza-Ontiveros 2013,

Monterrubio et al. 2014 2015, Ontiveros and Cordero 2012). Spring break trips to Europe are also becoming increasingly popular (Campbell and Schneider-Rebozo 2014). Furthermore, universities recently understood that they were missing out on potential revenue, and now offer a host of study abroad and intensive on campus and distance courses (for an additional fee) during the break period, marketed to students as “alternative spring break(s)” (Brumbaugh 2010, Bowen 2011, Niehaus and Kurotsuchi Inkelas 2015, Niehaus and Rivera 2016, Piacitelli et al. 2013). Given that most universities traditionally do not hold classes and close their residential dormitories during the break period (so they can be profitably rented to others), they effectively transform every student into a spring breaker. As most corporations who target the 18 to 25-year-old demographic have discovered long ago (Goodman 2001), every spring breaker is a potential consumer of a variety of products and services, which universities, corporations, and local municipalities are in a uniquely advantageous position to furnish. The potential revenue, in income and tax collections, is simply too great.

Thus, I have some reservations that spring break has indeed left (the) Florida (Panhandle) for good. Further, the “death” of spring break in the Florida Panhandle, or at least in Panama City Beach, has been heralded before, in eerily similar circumstances (WTLV 2004). That too, was short-lived. As municipalities struggle with perpetually decreasing public funds, they are likely to turn to tourism revenue as a panacea for their fiscal and economic ailments. Those who are capable to capture another demographic, as Fort Lauderdale, Daytona Beach, and Panama City Beach seem to have done, will do so, whereas others will continue to have pursue the spring break crowd, with all that entails. Perhaps presciently, MTV debuted a new reality television show, *Floribama Shore* (Salsano and Tappon 2017-), a spin-off of the immensely popular and controversial *Jersey Shore* (Salsano et al. 2009-2012), set in the Florida Panhandle and based on the real-life misadventures of several perpetual spring breakers. Only time will tell if spring break, in its most rowdy incarnations, has truly left the sandy white beaches of the Panhandle; but for now, let us see where the next few years take us. I for one, find comfort in the fact that Floridians, much like tourism itself, are nothing if extremely resilient.

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