

Food is a fundamental aspect of our lives; we need it to stay alive certainly but it also serves a deeper, more cultural process. Food events and ideas seem to form the basis for most of our socialization as children and as adults. Our lives center on food; how food is prepared and procured, what we eat, and why we eat it. The United States is a special place when it comes to food. We have many distinct regions within our large landmass. The South is a very distinct cultural region, although its boundaries and borders are highly debated. Being a distinct area, the South also has distinct patterns of food categories. Of course, others, both insiders and outsiders to the Southern culture, do not always accept these patterns. In many ways, some specific food categories place ideals on groups of people; food can carry both stigma and stereotypes, which can be both covert, or secret and overt or obvious.

In this paper, I hope to explore the topics of stigma and stereotypes as they are applied to specific categories of food in the South by southerners. It is my conclusion that the South is a unique region because stringent categories of what is acceptable, in terms of food and what is not, do not seem to exist as they do in other regions in the United States. Here, in the South and especially the rural areas, food categories are often more lax. We, and I include myself in this conversation, tend to blur the lines when it comes to what we can and cannot eat. I see this blurring of categorical lines what ultimately produces and persists stereotypes and stigma.

To facilitate my goals I will begin by explaining what the terms stereotype and stigma mean. Next, we will explore two examples of stereotype and stigma that are often applied to food categories in the South. It is my hope that these examples will make clear my previous thoughts and the thesis of this paper.

According to standard definitions, stigma is a mark of disgrace that is associated with a particular circumstance or quality. Other words that can be used in a similar fashion to stigma are shame and dishonor; all having very negative connotations. Stereotype, on the other hand refers to a widely held idea or image of a particular type of person that is fixed but oversimplified. Unlike stigma, which is usually negative to an extreme degree, stereotypes can exist on a spectrum of negativity with some being stronger than others are.

These two concepts become major players when it comes to food. Culturally, food is deeply rooted to our ideals of identity and group belonging. Humans generally feel an inherent need to belong to a group and to discover an identity, namely because having one or both of these intangible qualities allows us to not feel like outsiders and to not be seen as “the other”. Food plays many roles in our lives; probably the second most important role would be in shaping who we think we are and what people see of us. Think about it, how much does what you eat define you? Now think about what you do not eat, how much do the categories of what you consider to not be food almost define who you are and what you believe?

When we see or hear about specific groups of people, we automatically reach into what has been culturally constructed in our social minds to look for ways to understand people who are not like us. I would like to assume that this is where some of our stereotypes emerge from, although there are certainly many cases where stereotypes bloom from pure negativity and false information. We generally tend to oversimplify others into categories that make sense, often by using aspects of culture that we all share. This is where food comes in since all humans need food of some sort. We all can relate

to this fundamental need and therefore it serves as a poignant marker with which to compare and contrast all humans. Stigma is a different story. As you may recall, stigma is the mark of disgrace, dishonor, or shame on a person or persona. I see stigma like the stereotype, as a system of categorization; however, stigma serves as a stronger defense mechanism against the ideal of the other. By putting a stronger marker of negativity on something that we do not accept in our culture, we place it out of bounds for use and it becomes a more stringent category of what not to be.

So, I have discussed a lot of theoretical constructs and ideals, but what does this have to do with foodways and my field of study, folk studies? As discussed in the start of this paper food is fundamental, physically, culturally, and socially. In the field of folk studies, foodways is an integral facet of human culture and folk practices; our food practices are rooted in knowledge and ideas that are passed down through tradition and groups that we inhabit. Along with this idea of what is passed down as edible is also, what is passed down as not being edible or as having attached stigma and stereotype. I believe that in the Southern United States, these things are just as prevalent as elsewhere, but in many cases the stigma and stereotypes of the South are believed, accepted, and proliferated more than other regions.

We have all heard our share of what makes southern food quintessentially southern. I would highly doubt that many people here have never heard stereotypes of food one could find in the backwoods of Kentucky, the bayous of Louisiana, or in the kitchen sinks of Alabama. Now that we have laid the proper groundwork for fundamental concepts in this paper, let's look at two specific examples that are common in the South and that pertain to food. Our first example is that of road kill being served

for dinner in the South and our second example is on the consumption of forbidden animal parts.

One of the most common stereotypes on Southern foodways traditions is that of road kill. For basis, road kill is exactly what it sounds like; usually wild animals that were killed on the road, usually by vehicles. Animals are collected while considered still fresh and consumed. Many people hold true that this is a common foodway of many rural southerners, especially those who carry other stereotypical identifiers such as redneck and hillbilly. While this could be a common phenomenon in some areas, I believe that this stereotype serves as a maker of both otherness but also as a categorical marker of what is food and what is not. In this case, food is not something that is wild and is killed without meaning or intent. In a sense, road kill are animals that are liminal, or that do not fit into rigid categories because they were not hunted as food but were found. They were not meant for consumption, but because the opportunity presents itself, they can change categories into the edible.

In terms of road kill, there is a distinct stigma placed on those who are consumers. A very vehement label to shame and disgust are placed on consumers of road kill, I would speculate this is done because there is a distinct difference in eating something that is already dead and killing and then eating an animal. Some would tend to view a dead animal as having tainted, or maybe even dangerous meat whereas an animal that was hunted is safe because of the cultural intervention of humans versus that of just nature.

On to our second example, using and consuming specific parts of animals is heavily laden with meaning, including stereotypes and stigma. Our popular culture is a source for perpetuating these ideas; television programs have made fun of and brought to

light some practices that I have seen as common to the South. Consumption of animal parts like the brains, feet, eyes, and intestines all have their stereotypes and stigmas attached. I believe that this is the case because these sorts of protein sources are liminal in that they are not really what we think of when it comes to meat. Often, these parts have strange textures, colors, and flavors. When we think of typical animal sources and products, these parts fall into the category of other and may even scare us.

So thinking back to stereotypes and stigma, just as with road kill there is a very distinct stigma that is placed on those who eat these animal organs and parts; often the two examples coincide producing or being the product of similar if not the same stigmas and stereotypes. Typically, the same people eat these two examples. Ultimately, these stigmas and stereotypes could exist because of a deep-rooted fear of the unknown and what we cannot categorize, for example already dead animals and the texture and color of brains. Although stigma and stereotypes are negative aspects of culture, they serve as a sort of safety mechanism where we are allowed to give these strange things a meaning and a category.

In conclusion, I would like to revisit my initial and overall topic of food in the south. Here, with Kentucky being in that cultural region, the South has distinct categories of what is food and not food. However, as compared to other regions the rules of eating are different. For those of this cultural region, the categories produced by these rules are more lax. It is these different rules and the ease of categories, which produce cultural stereotypes and stigma.