Why Barbecue Matters in the South

Anoop Desai
Honors Thesis in American Studies

Marcie Cohen Ferris, Honors Advisor
James G. Ferguson
William Ferris

"…barbecue is one of the institutions of the South. To have known it means happiness; not to have known it means that link in the chain of life has been lost." [1]

"Myth thus is the food that feeds our sense of identity and enables us to imagine the invisible though the visible and to give life to our faith through symbols."[2]

[1] Andrews, Maude. "The Georgia Barbecue" *Cornbread Nation 2*
[2] Quesada, Jan Jaynes. "Food and Culture in a Biblical Context: Background Information and Terms," 4

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Introduction

In the film *Gone with the Wind,* Scarlett exclaims "as God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again!" This scene of Scarlett rising defiantly against the backdrop of a setting sun, cursing Yankees and defending her right to live, is an iconic representation of sectionalism and what historian C. Vann Woodward called the "sweet syrup of romanticism." It is no coincidence that food is at the center of such an important scene. Although procuring and consuming food is a biological necessity for all humans, eating is never just that. Especially in the South, food is a deeply symbolic representation of identity. Southern food is a material representation of southern agriculture, strong folkloric traditions, the importance of family and community, southern economic history, and social history. It reflects the unique characteristics of the region, especially compared to the rest of the United States. The South has a history all its own—one shaded with dissent, conflict, and suspicion—and this history is evident in the tenacity with which southerners protect their traditions. Southern culinary traditions like barbecue maintain a sense of southern identity by linking the region with its past and its rich culture. John Egerton writes that, "For as long as there has been a South, and people who think of themselves as southerners, food has been central to the region's image, its personality, and its character."[3] Scarlett's exclamation defines Southern foodways, like the South itself, as deeply protected, religious, and oppositional.

Barbecue is one of the most celebrated and contested southern foods. Although grits, fried chicken, collard greens, and other foods are iconic southern dishes, barbecue stands out because of its symbolic representation of different regions

[3] Egerton, John. *Southern Food,* 2

of the American South. Despite what someone says about their mother's fried chicken being the best, fried chicken is essentially the same dish, no matter the variations in breading and seasoning (said with apologies to fried chicken aficionados). Barbecue, on the other hand, is a dish with great variation in technique, style, and taste. There are many southern styles of barbecue, and each reflects its particular place of origin. To a Texan, for example, barbecue is beef brisket smothered with a thick sauce. To an eastern North Carolinian, barbecue is pulled pork with a light sprinkling of vinegar and pepper. This variety makes barbecue especially important in defining southern culture and place. Like a proudly displayed flag, each barbecue style, restaurant, and gathering is a statement of shared identity. The construction and preservation of these special identities has created a "barbecue myth" in the American South.

Mythmaking is a primary way that southerners have historically understood sense of place. Historian Henry Nash Smith defines myth in this context as "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image."[4] Southerners have defined the region through the mythic imagery of "moonlight and magnolias," plantation culture, and the "lost cause." These myths tell a "story that some people regard as sacred…an extraordinary narrative whose truth is beyond question because it reveals something of great importance about the meaning of human life and about the universe in which we live and die."[5] In the South, "remembered" stories about a white, aristocratic southern past and post-bellum white victimization live on to this day. These mythic stories observe the South's diverse past through a narrow lens that reshapes the telling of southern history.

[4] Gerster, Patrick and Cords, Nicholas, ed. *Myth and Southern History*, xiv
[5] Quesada, 1

The same narrow lens has examined southern barbecue. Barbecue has been mythologized in a way that causes individual, place-specific traditions to be lost. Instead, barbecue in the South has become a popular commodity; a means by which advertisers and television's Food Network sell the South to a broad media market. When barbecue is explored in popular culture, it often reveals little about the underlying tradition. Eastern and western North Carolina barbecue, for example, have been repeatedly written about in the state's major newspapers. These articles contain little that has not already been said about barbecue and none examine barbecue in a non-mythologized way. Few, if any, anthropological or folkloric explorations of the state's signature food have ever been undertaken. No attention has been given to what the differences between the two styles mean culturally or what unique barbecue traditions tell us about the history of North Carolina, the broader South, and its people. As a result, the deeper cultural and social markers of barbecue that reveal a shared identity in North Carolina and throughout the South are ignored.

Only by paying attention to local people, communities, and traditions can we truly decipher the cultural information embedded in the barbecue myth. Barbecue tells a narrative of class, race, geography, gender, and history. It is one that speaks to the values that southerners hold dear: the importance of family, the meaning of hard work, and the shared "burden of southern history" to use Woodward's term. This paper utilizes ethnographic and historical research to explore the barbecue myth; to widen the narrow lens that has examined this iconic food in the past, and to and demonstrate how barbecue tells a diverse and evolving story of the American South. Barbecue is not just a food; it is a culinary representation of southern culture.

Chapter 1: Why Foodways?

The study of food in the field of folklore, known as foodways, first gained prominence in the United States in 1970. Don Yoder, who would become the most influential folklorist associated with foodways, attended the first International Symposium on Ethnological Food Research in Lund, Sweden that year. Nils-Arvid Bringeus, the organizer of the symposium, brought together researchers from across the world to discuss what he called "food and fellowship." He saw in food the ability to reveal "lines of demarcation between the classes of a community," and also to "serve as links between people."[6] The ideas and methodologies that Yoder brought back to the United States would inspire subsequent generations of folklorists to focus on food as a tool for cultural study. Although food traditions have been passed down for ages in cookbooks and family recipes, the emergence of the field of foodways marked a clear call for an intensive study of food as a representation of folk culture. As Yoder wrote in an article entitled "Folk Cookery," "The study of folk cookery includes the study of the foods themselves, their morphology, their preparation, their preservation, their social and psychological functions, and their ramifications into all other aspects of folk culture."[7] Yoder believed that traditional folk cookery was on the decline, and that foodways scholarship was a method of preserving and cataloguing those traditions. Since the seminal decade of the 1970s, foodways research has expanded and gained acceptance as a mode of study.

Still, however, the question of why folklorists should be interested in foodways remains. To many, food seems too obvious a subject to pursue. Everyone must eat,

[6] Camp, Charles. *American Foodways*, 14
[7] Yoder, Don. "Folk Cookery," *Folklore and Folklife*, 325

after all. It is precisely because everyone must eat that food is important to the cultural scholar and folklorist. As Charles Camp writes, "Culture itself is the product of our search for food."[8] Food is universal. The study of food reveals volumes about environment, society, values, economics, history, and more. Because food is so basic, these revelations can be gleaned from the role food plays in all societies and cultures. The old adage, "you are what you eat," is an absolute truism in the field of foodways.

Eating habits are determined by a variety of indirect and direct social influences. Culture, genetics, nutrition, beliefs and attitudes, availability, price, setting of occasions, social ideation, and moral domain can all influence food habits indirectly.[9] These factors are of the utmost importance to food scholars because they paint robust pictures of societies and individuals. This information can shape public policy, aid historical scholarship, and expand the ways in which folklorists and anthropologists study groups and group behaviors. A foodways study of North Carolina barbecue has the potential to redefine the terms in which we see the South. Distinctions in politics, race, and economics have always defined group dynamics in our region, but the field of foodways and this thesis submit that there are different ways of mapping southern society. Scholars and lay southerners alike have sought to understand how the South is unique and why this uniqueness is important. It could be as simple, and as overlooked, as barbecue.

[8] Camp, 21
[9] Rozin, Paul. "Sociocultural Influences on Human Food Selection," *Why We Eat…,* 233-57

Chapter 2: Barbecue in the South
"Barbecue is as old as fire."[10]

The practice of cooking meat, or barbecuing, is universal, as demonstrated by the Cambodian pit masters at Stamey's Barbecue, a venerated western North Carolina barbecue restaurant in Greensboro. Although they have no cultural background in North Carolina barbecue, these former Cambodian farmers have been tending the fires at Greensboro's oldest restaurant for over twenty years. Smoked meat is so common around the world that after smoking pork shoulders in what is considered a traditional method in western North Carolina, the Stamey's pit masters eat the meat on a bed of rice covered in soy sauce. The tray of barbecue that comes out to a table at Stamey's is essentially the same food. How can one be Cambodian food and the other be traditional North Carolina barbecue? If two different cultures can identify the same food as their own, it would seem that barbecue does not "belong" to any one region, but rather the entire world. But although barbecue is a basic and universal food, it has also become "*the* Southern food."[11] The task of this paper is to explore how something so seemingly universal, even ordinary, can authentically and validly represent the South. How, in other words, did cooked meat become "barbecue," a food with the power to define and express identity in the American South?

At a basic level, it has to do with the way that barbecue is defined in the South. While northerners apply the word to the process of grilling meat and the grill itself, southerners reserve it for the final product. "To us, it's a noun, not a verb," said Chip Stamey of Stamey's Barbecue.[12] And that product is different wherever one

[10] Egerton, 149
[11] Reed, John Shelton. "Barbecue Sociology: The Meat of the Matter," *Cornbread Nation 2*, 79
[12] Stamey, Chip. 2007

goes in the South. Kansas and Tennessee produce either wet or dry pork ribs. South Carolinians are fond of pulled pork in a mustard-based sauce, while Texans take advantage of their ranching heritage and cook beef brisket in a thick red sauce. North Carolina barbecue is generally divided into two camps although hybrid versions exist. Eastern North Carolina barbecue is known as "whole hog" barbecue. The hogs are split open lengthwise and smoked for up to twelve hours. The meat from the entire pig is then used to create a dish flavored only with vinegar and pepper. Western North Carolinians employ another style, often called Lexington-style. Only the pork shoulders are used and the meat is flavored first with a vinegar, pepper, and tomato sauce known as "dip." The sauce is a thicker, tomato-based mixture generally available for the diner to apply to taste.

The evidence tracing how the first forms of barbecue evolved to encompass this range of tastes and techniques is mixed. Even the origins of the word "barbecue" are disputed. The most widely accepted etymological theory for the word "barbecue" is that it comes from the Spanish "barbacoa." When the Spanish conquered parts of the Americas, they found natives roasting animals on a framework of branches. This framework, the earliest barbecue pit, became known as a barbacoa. Some of the earliest illustrations of the New World, such as John White's watercolors of the 1585 Roanoke expedition, depict barbacoas.[13] Another theory, and the favorite of eastern North Carolina whole-hog pit masters, is that the word barbecue comes from the French phrase "barbe-a-que" which translates to "from head to tail." This definition,

[13] Original White watercolors and Harriot DeBry engravings catalogued online at: http://www.virtualjamestown.org/images/white_debry_html/jamestown.html. Licensed by the British Museum.

says Jeff Jones of the Skylight Inn in Ayden, is why his family has been practicing the whole-hog method for generations.[14]

While the first mention of barbecue in the English language was in 1661, a 1732 Alexander Pope quote, "Send me, Gods! a whole hog barbecu'd," supports the second theory of the word's origin.[15] Barbecue is also generally mentioned throughout historical documents in the colonial era. Laws were on the books in seventeenth century Virginia, for example, prohibiting the shooting of firearms at barbecues. This indicates that early in our country's history, barbecues were already public, community events. The historical record mentions the role of enslaved African men in cooking for these functions as well. John Egerton writes that although barbecues were not exclusive to the South, "it took root there when slavery was practiced."[16] Indeed, the assignment of slaves to the laborious undertaking of smoking a pig could explain why, by the height of the plantation era, barbecue was an essential ingredient to any political, religious, or civil gathering in the Deep South.[17]

As Sam Hilliard writes, "the use of swine for food in the South is proverbial."[18] A history of southern food supply and culture shows that pork was by far the most favored of the domesticated meats available to southerners in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his historical exploration of *Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South*, Joe Gray Taylor notes that the southern propensity for pork was a well-known characteristic of southerners even outside the region. Taylor quotes

[14] Jones, Jeff. 2007
[15] Walsh, Robb. "Texas Barbecue in Black and White," *Cornbread Nation 2: The United States of Barbecue*. Lois Eric Elie, ed., 51
[16] Egerton, 149-150
[17] Walsh, 51
[18] Hilliard, Sam. *Hogmeat and Hoecake.* 92

William Byrd, the Englishman responsible for delineating the North Carolina and South Carolina border, writing that pork was the "'…staple commodity of North Carolina…These people live so much upon swine's flesh that it don't only incline them to the yaws, and consequently to the [loss] of their noses, but makes them likewise extremely hoggish in their temper.'"[19]

There were good reasons for the prevalence of pork in the South. Hogs were easy to raise. They grew to maturity quickly, so that a pig born in the spring was ready to slaughter in the winter.[20] Hogs were also valued for their independence. A farmer could leave his animals in the woods during most of the year to fatten themselves by foraging for food. By not having to constantly tend to his hogs, the farmer could put his time into cultivating crops and raising other animals. "Compared to other animals," Taylor writes, "hogs were [also] efficient in converting grain to meat. One estimate is that twenty-four percent of the energy of grain eaten by hogs is made available for human consumption as opposed to…only 3.5 percent for beef and mutton."[21] Once slaughtered, a hog's fat was rendered into lard, its intestines were made into chitterlings, and what meat was not immediately used was salted and stored for future consumption or as slave rations. Hams and other cuts of pork were valued and often served at community gatherings.

For most of southern history, barbecue was a food eaten mainly at large, rural social gatherings. To southerners, "barbecue both symbolizes and contributes to community."[22] Barbecues have always been communal events, whether as part of

[19] Taylor, Joe Gray. *Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South.* 21
[20] Taylor, 22
[21] Ibid.
[22] Reed, 79

political rallies, church picnics, or football tailgates. In Eastern North Carolina, barbecues often celebrated the opening of the tobacco market.[23] Not only does barbecue bring people together for a meal, but the process of smoking meat is itself a social event. It takes hours to properly complete, and pit masters in small communities often gather their friends and families for a night-long session of cooking and drinking in preparation for a barbecue the next day. This culinary expression of community makes barbecue particularly important to southerners.

In the past century, barbecue has outgrown its rural origins. The vast reach of barbecue culture today is indebted to the advent of the restaurant in the early 1900s. John Egerton writes that by the 1920s, the growing popularity of restaurants and the introduction of the hamburger bun gave rise to entrepreneurial barbecue stands across the South.[24] These stands are credited with popularizing barbecue throughout the region. Different styles of barbecue became associated with specific areas and their pit masters, establishing the many styles of southern barbecue culture.

The North Carolina tradition was started at similar barbecue stands. The advent of commercial barbecue was dominated by whites. Jim Crow laws made it difficult for an African American to set up a business in the South during the 1920s. Although African Americans were active barbecuers, it remained a rural, family based activity until later in the twentieth century. Most authorities credit Bob Melton with originating the eastern North Carolina barbecue restaurant tradition. Melton was a white merchant who set up a small "barbecue shed" in 1922 in Rocky Mount.[25] He renovated and rebuilt the original shack two years later on the spot where Melton's

[23] Jones, 2007
[24] Egerton, 150
[25] Garner, Bob. *North Carolina Barbecue: Flavored by Time*, 7

stood until a few years ago. Melton's style of preparing barbecue used "whole hogs cooked over oak or hickory coals, finely chopped and fairly dry, and seasoned before serving with a touch of the same sauce used to baste the roasting pig—vinegar, salt, black pepper, and red pepper."[26] The beginnings of the Western-style tradition can be found outside the Lexington, North Carolina courthouse. Sid Weaver set up a tent outside the courthouse in 1919, "since the court session brought a steady stream of country dwellers to town."[27] Soon, Jess Swicegood erected a competing stand next to Weaver's establishment. Their makeshift stands evolved into permanent buildings that housed a steady barbecue trade for the next two decades.

Although Swicegood and Weaver are credited with starting the Lexington barbecue tradition, the skills of the trade were passed on in large part by one of Swicegood's employees, Charles Warner Stamey. He began working for Swicegood in 1927, and three years later moved to Shelby, North Carolina to open a restaurant of his own with the barbecue secrets he had learned in Lexington. There, he taught the craft to Alston and Red Bridges (unrelated), two now well-known practitioners of the Lexington style. When Stamey moved back to Lexington a few years later, he bought his old teacher's restaurant and continued the tradition by teaching the same methods to Wayne Monk, now the mogul of western North Carolina barbecue and the owner of Lexington Barbecue. Stamey eventually taught many of the most respected white masters of the western trade including the pit masters behind Smoky Joe's and

[26] Ibid.
[27] Garner, 8

Jimmy's Barbecue in Lexington. As Wayne Monk stated, "the Stamey family sort of shined the light for all of us."[28]

Restaurants fueled the spread of barbecue throughout the South because they were, like previous rural barbecues, centers of community traditions. Warner Stamey's methods influenced an entire community of white restaurateurs, and through them, created a region of barbecue preference and practice. Each of these restaurants and their pit masters created barbecue communities centered on their establishments. In this way, barbecue has become a folkloric tradition that is passed down through generations of the same community. The maintenance of this folkloric art is essential to keeping barbecue a quintessentially southern food. The element of folklore in barbecue is appealing to outsiders who wish to emulate both the myth and reality of traditional southern barbecue. The result is that although barbecue has been popularized as a food, it has lost its place-based uniqueness. Barbecue has been separated from authentic community structures like the eastern North Carolina pig pickin' and the traditional barbecue restaurant. Such a separation deprives barbecue of its folkloric importance, and instead relegates it to mythology.

[28] Monk, 2007

Chapter 3: Southern Myth

"We Southerners are a mythological people, created half out of dream and half out of slander, who live in a still legendary land"[29]

The South is no stranger to myth. Myth serves important religious, social, and psychological functions for many societies. Jan Jaynes Quesada identifies three social functions of myth that are readily applicable to southern society. First, myth serves to integrate individuals into a group, "establishing group identity and social solidarity by facilitating 'the participation of the social group in its own past' and 'the feeling that the group is, as it were, actually living in that epoch.'"[30] Concurrently, myth can either reinforce or criticize a social order by "presenting a new one or recommending an old one."[31] In this case, barbecue has assumed a mythic stature that reinforces traditionally southern characteristics. This identity comes with a caveat—while the barbecue myth represents aspects of southern culture, it ignores how barbecue defines region, and adds little to a cultural investigation of southern culture. Exploring the mythic identity of barbecue and understanding its place in the pantheon of southern symbols is central to barbecue's folkloric and cultural importance to the region.

The study of the mythic South—how the region is inexorably bound up in the common psyche of its people—began with George Tindall's 1964 essay, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History." The essay explores the ways in which the American South has taken on numerous identities, all true in some respect, but all represented in a manner that significantly skews the truth in a significant way. Southern memory is told through different perspectives and by different segments of society. Historian Paul Gaston suggests "what does distinguish the South, at least

[29] Tyndall, George. "Mythic South" *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, 1093
[30] Quesada, 2-3
[31] Quesada, 3

from other parts of the United States, is the degree to which myths have been spawned and the extent to which they have asserted their hegemony over the Southern mind."[32] The most pervasive southern myths attempt to overcome negative characteristics ascribed to the region. Since the antebellum era, southerners have been adept at defending the South by crafting mythic representations of it. As late as 1960, C. Vann Woodward wrote "With the crumbling of so many defenses in the present, the South has tended to substitute myths about the past."[33]

The antebellum Cavalier legend, for example, degraded northerners and elevated white southerners by referencing the historical conflict between aristocratic Cavaliers and revolutionary Roundheads in seventeenth century England. The proponents of this myth saw themselves as a well-to-do, noble class fighting off a desperate abolitionist rebellion from Yankee curs. The propensity for southern mythmaking continued after the war. In response to the loss of wealth and status that accompanied the Confederacy's defeat, southerners created legends of the Old South and the Lost Cause. These myths, borrowed from the Cavalier legend, allowed the South to maintain a sense of dignity in the face of poverty and defeat. They continued to define the South well into the twentieth century, even though as early as 1880, the New South was making great strides towards industrialization and fulfilling the doctrine of white Progress.[34] The mythic South emerged in response to this desperate condition. It was a view of the South which ennobled whites by attributing to them a skewed notion of plantation-era nobility. According to W.J. Cash, the appropriation

[32] Gaston, Paul M. "The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking."
[33] Woodward, C. Vann. *The Burden of Southern History.* 12
[34] Cobb, James. *Away Down South*, 72-98
Cash, W.J. *Mind of the South*

of this identity aided the South in defending itself from northern attacks. He wrote that this mythic identity "Enable[d] the South to wrap itself in a contemptuous superiority, to sneer down the Yankee as low-bred, crass, and money-grubbing, and even to beget in his bourgeois soul a kind of secret and envious awe…"[35]

The mythologized versions of southern history, which characterized the white South as honorable and aristocratic, are the bases for a large part of the southern mythmaking tradition. They affected every Southerner. White women were pigeonholed into domestic roles. John Hope Franklin writes that "The census continued to describe them as 'keeping home' while, in fact, they were managing farms and plantations, teaching in the local schools, working in factories, and entering numerous service occupations."[36] Even poor white farmers, who had never known the grandeur of plantation aristocracy, bought into the myths of the Old South. In the South's opposition to the North, most white citizens were united in their regionalism. Yeomen farmers and poor whites were therefore able to transcend their actual condition to assume a mythic white identity of privilege.

Southern blacks also defined their identity in the mythologized postwar era. Fitzhugh Brundage recounts how public celebrations of black memory were instrumental in the drive to create a distinct identity in the face of white mythmaking. After the Civil War, blacks in southern cities and rural areas alike were eager to publicly and grandly assert their emancipation and their cultural uniqueness. African Americans appropriated George Washington's birthday, Lincoln's birthday, and

[35] Cash, 61-62
[36] Franklin, John Hope. "The South and the Problem of Change," *Myth and Southern History*.

Independence Day black holidays in many southern communities.[37] In so doing, blacks not only gave social significance to their freedom by creating their own public traditions, but also downplayed and thus opposed white mythology and public memory. Mythmaking can be seen as a fundamental and active part of group identification in the South. The evolution of the southern mythic tradition has a direct impact on the way that all southerners create and uphold their regional myths today, including those related to barbecue.

Just as a mythic version of southern history reduced a complex and diverse society to the vestiges of plantation culture, a mythic ideal of southern barbecue reduced it to a pop-cultural commodity. The struggle to keep true, pit cooked barbecue alive in North Carolina and throughout the South is a battle being won by commercialization and other factors. Environmental laws limiting the smoke that a restaurant can produce have made it all but impossible to open a new pit barbecue restaurant in most states, and electric cookers are an attractive alternative to hard hours spent tending coals before day break. The result is a barbecue culture that no longer expresses the folkloric importance of the craft in the way it used to. Barbecue is becoming increasingly "mainstreamed," writes Calvin Trillin of the *New Yorker*.[38] The Arby's fast food chain has their "Arby-Q" sandwich, for instance. There is barbecue available for purchase in the refrigerated foods aisle of most grocery stores, too. Even the venerated barbecue restaurants, once regarded as community centers and strongholds of barbecue folklore, have fallen victim to the trend of commercialization. Trillin explains the trend in *Feeding a Yen*:

[37] Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *The Southern Past*, 61-62
[38] Trillin, Calvin. *Feeling a Yen*, 181

> Suddenly there were so many barbecue-cooking contests that in certain seasons a competitive barbecuer could haul his rig from fairground to fairground like a man with a string of quarter horses. There was reason to be concerned that barbecue, like so much else in American, had become self-conscious and labeled and packaged and relentlessly organized and fitted out with promotional T-shirts.[39]

The flawed parts of barbecue mainstreaming are as evident as the negative parts of historical mythicization. The accuracy of historical and folkloric traditions is lost in both cases. No doubt, pop-culturization has helped many a barbecue restaurant stay afloat in the fast-food era. Perhaps because the Arby-Q sandwich exists, the real thing is that much more desirable. An entire industry has emerged around the image of barbecue as a niche food. This image celebrates barbecue as a symbol of southernness, but not the culture behind individual barbecue traditions. Barbecue guide books like Jim Early's *The Best Tar Heel Barbecue* and Bob Garner's *North Carolina Barbecue: Flavored by Time*, lead hungry foodies on road tours of North Carolina. Pit masters have been invited to the White House to feed southern Presidents and their guests. The mere mention of barbecue to any North Carolinian audience will elicit recommendations and anecdotes. All of these examples demonstrate that barbecue's strength as a myth lies in its ability to create a southern experience in an increasingly generic South. It is the desire to capture that experience that is driving the current wave of pop-culturization and mainstreaming.

The fate of authentic barbecue traditions and southern history are similar in this way. In both cases, a prevailing myth has simplified a complicated subject and glossed over historical reality. In North Carolina, this standardization has taken the form of the "East vs. West" debate. Hundreds of unique barbecue traditions across the

[39] Trillin, 182

state have been placed into opposing “eastern” and “western” categories as a result. The parallels between such classifications in barbecue and in southern history are evident. Just as a mythic retelling of southern history reduced a diverse antebellum southern society to a series of skewed legends, a reduction of North Carolina barbecue traditions has also occurred. These one-dimensional classifications are meaningless to a study of southern culture because they include nothing about the people and places behind individual traditions. Instead, a simple difference in eastern and western barbecue sauces has evolved into a publicized mythical battle waged in newspaper editorials, television shows, and guide books. Despite the impossibility of representing all North Carolina barbecue in a few restaurant profiles, the standardization of barbecue in the popular mind has allowed just that.

Chapter 4: Barbecue as Myth

The same process that has mythologized barbecue in the South has created mythic representations of southern culture for centuries. Especially after the Civil War, a mythic plantation South became the bastion of southern social and cultural values, if only an imagined one. The mythic paradigm resisted the reality of a South "in the midst of an economic and social revolution," which had "already leveled many of the old monuments of regional distinctiveness…"[40] It protected a false ideal of southern history much as standardization and commercialization create a false barbecue culture in the contemporary South. Both myths serve the "decidedly positive function of unifying experience providing, in the words of [novelist] Mark Schorer, 'a large controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life, that is, which has an organizing value for experience.'"[41] Myths allow southerners to feel distinct by defining the southern experience through common ideas. Barbecue, for instance, connects people to a southern agrarian ideal that has been lost in contemporary society. Myth creates public memory which is "inextricably bound up with group identity."[42] As a more homogeneous American culture overtakes the distinctive one of the Old South, such group identities are fundamental to preserving a distinct sense of southernness. This is why North Carolinians care so much about what side of Rocky Mount their barbecue comes from; it symbolizes their identity.

Barbecue is also a symbol of the region that like the plantation manor, has been exploited for representational purposes. John Egerton writes:

[40] Woodward, C. Vann. "The Search for Southern Identity".
[41] Murray, Henry A. "The Necessity of Myth." *Myth and Mythmaking*
[42] Brundage, Fitzhugh. *Where Memories Grow*, 3

> Because it is such an integral part of the culture, Southern food provides an excellent entrée to the people and their times…To learn what has gone on in the kitchen and the dining room—and what still goes on there—is to discover much about a society's physical health, its economic condition, its race relations, its class structure, and the status of its women.[43]

To the question, "Beyond nostalgia, is there not a living heritage that contemporary Southerners can identify with," barbecue pit masters and restaurant owners answer with a resounding "yes."[44] Barbecue culture is a living representation of regional culture for southerners and outsiders alike as powerful as jazz, quilts, tobacco barns, bluegrass, and country music.

The proof of this is found in the words of North Carolinians. Any conversation about barbecue is lengthy, involved, and draws others in from around the room. Every person has a barbecue story or experience which they are eager to share, in part to establish themselves as southern. Outsiders are in on it, too. Diana Parker, a D.C. Washingtonian and the Director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, feels this connection to Parker's Barbecue in Wilson, North Carolina. Ever since a visit there years ago, she has felt more connected to the South and considers Parker's eastern North Carolina barbecue to be the taste of the region.[45] Parker oversees a folk festival that reaches over 1 million people each year, so her vivid descriptions of Parker's barbecue were especially evocative of her southern experience. Reactions are usually passionate. When conversation about barbecue starts, all other topics cease to have merit. Talk leads to a session of sharing barbecue secrets between members of the barbecue "fraternity." These conversations recall the shared experiences of home.

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[43] Egerton, 3
[44] Tindall. *Myth and Southern History*, 13
[45] Parker, 2007

They are also part of the folklore of barbecue. The act of talking about barbecue follows the southern tradition of storytelling and oral history. These story-telling sessions are often the only ways modern barbecue lovers can be a part of barbecue culture. Most modern southerners do not live on farms, raise tobacco, or have smokehouses in their back yards. Conversations about barbecue and barbecue restaurants present an opportunity for contemporary southerners to connect with a southern culinary history that is inaccessible for many in the twenty-first century. Sharing anecdotes and preferences preserves barbecue in the hearts and minds of southerners like childhood stories passed down from one's parents.

Proof of barbecue's ability to represent the South is also present in the way that southern politicians use it to position themselves to their constituents. For generations, southern politicians used barbecue to demonstrate they understood southern identity. As far back as the nineteenth century, politics and barbecue were closely related. An 1860 letter by D.R. Hundley proclaims that the white southern farmer was educated in political maters "chiefly owing to the public barbecues…which are more numerous in the South than in the North, and…are always devoted in part to political discussions."[46] Barbecue has long been a tool used by white North Carolina politicians to "gather voters, thank supporters, and pass the hat. It's an old tradition in our politics, right up there with stump speeches and influence peddling."[47] As North Carolina barbecue authority Bob Garner explains, barbecues are "a good way to connect with voters in terms of shared experience… [giving] a high-born candidate just the right hint of the common touch, while [one]

[46] Paterson, Thomas G. *Major Problems in the History of the American South Volume I: The Old South*, 259
[47] Auchmutey, Jim. "Politics and Pork," *Cornbread Nation 2*, 69

from humbler circumstances can proudly out-redneck anyone on the subject."[48] Barbecue is such a critical part of the political scene that, as a Raleigh newspaper editor quipped, "no man has been elected governor of North Carolina without eating more barbecue than was good for him."[49] The association between barbecue and politics adds to its mythic stature.[50]

Because barbecue is symbolic of the South, both insiders and outsiders use it as a means to identify themselves with southern culture. Barack Obama, another politician, had his 2008 presidential campaign rally in Hillsborough, North Carolina catered by the Barbecue Joint, a Chapel Hill barbecue restaurant. Similarly, a native southerner might talk about barbecue to a new acquaintance in order to identify himself as southern. Both of these contribute to the folklore of barbecue, but each raises a concern about the image that barbecue has taken on. The ways in which modern southerners contribute to barbecue's folk culture often reduce it from a food with a rich cultural history to an essentialized symbol. When barbecue is no longer viewed as a folkloric tradition, it loses its ability to accurately represent southern culture.

This has been the fate of many symbols of the South. One of the characteristics of southern myth, and of myth in most societies, is that symbols tend to be used in representational, but non-specific ways. A symbol might distinguish a certain trait or characteristic of a society, but does not reveal why the trait is important. Barbecue mythology follows the same trend. As Brown and Mussel write in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways*, all people, especially foodways scholars, have a

[48] Garner, xiv
[49] Auchmutey, 69
[50] McCown, Deb. "The Politics of Barbecue."

tendency to make "assumptions about intra-cultural homogeneity and the tendency to present cultural patterns in uniformist terms." However, "When intra group variations are carefully observed…the research orientation subtly shifts, converting uniformist concepts…into variables…"[51] Each individual barbecue experience, then, is a variable which subtly changes the barbecue myth, with its own distinct memory, consciousness, and history. Only by understanding these experiences does barbecue become an adequate critical lens to view southern culture. Accepting barbecue as it exists in popular writing or on the Food Network is tantamount to reading *Gone with the Wind* as a historical text or viewing the film as a documentary.

The mythicization of barbecue is evident in the many guide books that have recently been published about North Carolina barbecue restaurants. Bob Garner's *North Carolina Barbecue: Flavored by Time*, contains legitimate historical information about North Carolina barbecue and the places that serve it, although often viewed through somewhat of a rosy lens. Unlike many mythologized accounts of barbecue, Garner's recognizes the form first and foremost as a "legacy handed down solemnly from one generation to the next in the small towns and farming hamlets of eastern and piedmont North Carolina," that is, a folkloric tradition. Even the title "Flavored by Time," suggests Garner understands the critical role of history in understanding barbecue. But he also embraces the mythic aspects associated with barbecue. Garner suggests that his brand of "frequent reminiscing no doubt elevated the quality of the barbecue to mythical proportions."[52] Sentences that begin, "Wispy,

[51] Keller Brown, Linda and Mussell, Kay, eds. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States,* 10.
[52] Garner, xi

blue smoke floating above a coppery brown split big, hissing and cracking over winking coals," reveal this mythic reverence of barbecue.

This association of barbecue with a more pastoral, agrarian past is present in literary representations of the South as well. James Applewhite's poem "Barbecue Service," is full of references to barbecue in relation to mythic vestiges of the Old South. Applewhite locates barbecue "Near the site of a Civil War surrender/…/Behind a single family's barn." As the barbecue cooks, the "…smolder draws the soul of our longings." Applewhite also associates barbecue with "the old home folks," and "…the brother who has drank [and] has been buried." The poem confirms southernness by referencing cultural archetypes. Representations of barbecue that reference the Old South, agrarianism, and other southern archetypes like whiskey and "the old home place," include barbecue in the same pantheon.

North Carolina barbecue is perhaps most mythologized by the constant comparisons between the eastern and western styles of preparation found in the state. Sociologist John Shelton Reed, "like[s] both Tar Heel varieties—to paraphrase Will Rogers, I've never met a smoked pig I didn't like."[53] This is not the prevailing wisdom, however. Examining newspaper articles and books on the subject reveals that eastern and western pit masters would physically fight if they came within a hundred yards of each other. It is the first question one is asked in any conversation about barbecue. Again, these conversations are part of barbecue's evolving folkloric culture, but one's regional style preference ties them to a particular place and positions them in opposition to those from other barbecue regions. Opposition (of good vs. evil) is a common attribute of all mythology, and the opposition inscribed in

[53] Reed, 86

the barbecue myth provides yet another example. The fire is fed by newspaper, magazine, and television reporters who keep the "debate" alive after most everyone else is ready to let it go. While columnists feud over the distinction, to the pit masters themselves, "it doesn't really matter."[54] The difference between eastern and western styles exists, but their over-emphasis distracts from what is really important about barbecue—those that make it and their history.

The commercialization of North Carolina barbecue has also created an economic interest in barbecue that has changed the meaning of the tradition. It reduces barbecue from a folkloric art steeped in tradition and southern history to a standardized and commercialized commodity. We live in an era when food comes "vacuumed sealed" or handed to us from a drive-thru window. Barbecue has suffered under this new food regime. To the public at large, barbecue is no longer an art form; rather, it is another food fast that tastes good. Barbecue restaurants get away with not using real wood fires to cook their pork. Community gatherings have given way to corporately sponsored barbecue cook-offs. Barbecue traditions across the South have been changed by middle-aged, white men who write blogs (just search Google for "barbecue blog") about which barbecue is the "best."

The popular culture of the non-barbecuers who are obsessed with barbecue has affected the pit masters as well. "I think they're a little strange," says Keith Allen of Allen and Son restaurant in Chapel Hill about unending interviews, television appearances and review books.[55] Allen does not question their interest in barbecue. Rather, he finds it strange that barbecue has become so meaningful in a meaningless

[54] Monk and Allen, 2006-2007
[55] Allen

way. Although the constant conversation about barbecue is, in fact, good for the industry, it suggests no recognition of the historic roots of this tradition. There is very little understanding of the importance of barbecue that can be gleaned by classifying sauces. The obsession with barbecue sauce allows southerners to engage with each other in a way that links them both to a southern symbol. It allows them to participate in a barbecue culture in which they are stakeholders. Barbecue guide books can be helpful for choosing a place to eat along I-85, but the culture of reviews, books, and judgments *about* barbecue has become the sole representation *of* barbecue. Like mythic representations of southern history, barbecue has been conveniently packaged to present a one-dimensional expression of a complicated and rich tradition.

Mythic, oppositional interpretations of barbecue are based on what Levi-Strauss calls "dual organization," as described earlier. The groups which constitute a dually organized society operate like clans in a tribal society. They trade and go to war with one another. The distinctions between these groups are based on structures of belief and worship which rely heavily on mythology and symbolism passed down through generations. Similarly, the residents of different barbecue regions operate in opposition to one another based on their time- honored traditions of barbecuing. Levi-Strauss' structural model, reiterated by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, is a legitimate way to understand the creation of myth in society. The opposition of eastern and western North Carolina barbecue styles is not coincidence, then, but the beginnings of a classic mythology as described by Levi-Strauss and Barthes.

Chapter 5: Barbecue as Religion
"In many respects, barbecue is taken as seriously as religion."[56]

The study of religion reveals another method of studying the definition of identity. Religious language is often used to describe southern devotion to barbecue in the South. Stephen Smith's essay on "The Rhetoric of Barbecue," clarifies this parallel:

> The definition of religion offered by one scholar could be applied as easily to the barbecue cult as well. Religion…is 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings,' and it is an attribute of social groups, compromising a component part of their cultural heritage...[57]

The events and behaviors of barbecue fans, especially in North Carolina, are symbolic, ritualistic, and speak to a shared social and cultural heritage.

Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* can be used to study barbecue as a religious symbol. In his book, Durkheim systematically attempts to understand what he calls "primitive societies" by ascribing social meaning to their ritual and cultural lives. He introduces the concept of totems–natural objects or animals that socially identify a group. In the totemic system, social groups are designated as clans, small subgroups of a larger, ethnic culture. Durkheim says of clan culture that,

> …the individuals who compose it consider themselves joined by a bond of kinship, but of a very special sort. This kinship does not come from specific blood relations with one another…They are not each other's fathers, mothers,

[56] Smith, Stephen. "The Rhetoric of Barbecue: A Southern Rite and Ritual" *Cornbread Nation 2*, 61
[57] Smith, 61-62

> sons or daughters, uncles or nephews in the sense we now give to these terms; and yet they regard each other as part of the same family.[58]

If one examines the Durkheimian paradigm in relation to North Carolina barbecue, then North Carolinians are divided into two clans of the same ethnic group. While North Carolina barbecue is an overarching "phratry," there are clear divisions between the eastern and western styles.[59] While the eastern clan enjoys whole-hog barbecue flavored with vinegar and pepper only, the western clan generally prefers pork shoulders in a slightly more tomato-flavored sauce. Durkheim's descriptions of the clan as a group based on a common ideal parallel Levi-Strauss' theories of social dualism, particularly in relation to barbecue mythology. He explains:

> Each clan has its own exclusive totem…indeed, one is part of a clan only by bearing a certain name. So all those who bear this name are members by the same right; they may be scattered across tribal territory, but they all have the same relations of kinship with one another...[60]

At the root of both clans is the symbolic pig totem. In the division of the pig phratry, Whole Pig defines the eastern clan, while Pig Shoulder represents the western clan.

Durkheim also offers a structure through which the clan's religious beliefs gain social importance. He defines rites as beliefs put into action. For barbecue mythology, these beliefs are deeply representative of region in the form of barbecue styles. They are mythically enacted in television specials, barbecue festivals, and guide books. The ritual practices which solidify and codify a culture's values are separated into two types, according to Durkheim. Positive rituals reinforce identity

[58] Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 88
[59] A phratry is "an archaic clan that was broken apart; the present clans would be the product of this break-up, and the solidarity that unites them, a remnant of their original unity." (Durkheim, 90)
[60] Durkheim, 88

and are used as communal enactments of shared beliefs. Negative rituals are concerned with separating the sacred from the profane in time and space. Each clan has a distinct system of beliefs and rituals sustain their respective religious totems. Belief has already been defined as sauce-based and meat-based. To the eastern clan, for instance, the whole-hog method of smoking a pig and a vinegar-based sauce are, to use Durkheim's terminology, "sacred." If ritual is the active celebration of the sacred as the natural opposite to the profane, then we must examine the ways in which each totemic clan promotes their totem. The ways in which clans promote their totems are

> …eminently contagious…In this way these objects themselves take on a religious value which is not really inherent in them but is conferred upon them from the outside… A special emotion gives [them] reality; [sacredness] is attached to an object because this emotion has encountered that object on its path.[61]

Barbecue is "contagious" because it is a folkloric art. Its secrets are passed down through successive generations, and like all folk art, barbecue is a venerated community tradition. In part through secrecy, pit masters entice curiosity and separate themselves from each other, elevating their work to the status of a folk craft. This is why every true North Carolinian has a favorite barbecue restaurant, and although we are all curious about what else is out there, we stay true to our native "joint." We proudly protect our undiscovered jewel. By building this sort of cultural loyalty to one's local brand of barbecue, each clan guarantees its continued survival in future generations and when customers move, some barbecuers even attempt to convert competitors' customers to their own barbecue clan. Although the creation of this sense of belonging is not explicitly ritualistic, it does involve the separation of the

sacred from the profane other. As a corollary, the introduction of a clan's barbecue to each subsequent generation is akin to a coming of age ritual, a rite that Durkheim specifically lays out as part of the positive cult. Several second generation pit masters, like Jeff Jones at the Skylight Inn, are living examples of this process of folkloric process. They have taken over restaurants and traditions based on the passed down knowledge of the previous generation.

Western North Carolina Barbecue is sometimes referred to as Lexington-style because of its concentration of western-style restaurants. Lexington, population, 20,000, is home to the pioneers of the western clan. Each year, it hosts "*The* Barbecue Festival," (italics mine for emphasis) an annual showcase of Lexington-style barbecue which is ranked one of the top ten food festivals in the United States. In 2003, over 150,000 barbecue fans attended the festival. Held at the end of October, it the culmination of "Barbecue Month" in Davidson County. This year marks the Twenty-Fourth Annual Barbecue Festival. This event is analogous to another positive ritual, the creation of a holiday. According to Durkheim, holidays are meant to celebrate the separate sacredness from the profanity of everyday life. And although eastern North Carolina pit masters have been present in years past, the Lexington Festival is most definitely a ritual celebration of western-style barbecue. The celebration of the western-style cult is never more apparent than at this festival/holiday. The Lexington Barbecue Festival is an example of a ceremony "intended solely to awaken certain ideas and feelings, to link the present to the past, the individual to the collectivity."[62] The Festival does not contribute to the practice of

[62] Durkheim, 280-1

barbecuing, nor does it serve any palpable purpose. However, it does contribute to the ritual belief and spread of western-style barbecue.

Using Durkheim's model and definitions, we can continue analyzing the parallel between barbecue and religion in an exploration of Judeo-Christian traditions. Much like the aboriginal religions which Durkheim studies, the Abrahamic religions dwell on rite and ritual as a profession of sacredness. Food is a particular focus of these practices. Although the aboriginal practices focus on totems as the creators of social worlds and practices, "The social world out of which the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament arose was largely an oral, traditional, patriarchal culture whose identity derived from a covenantal relationship with an ancestral, creator/liberator god (YHWH)."[63] Judeo-Christian religion, then, relies on the same type of "contagion" necessary for the spread of barbecue cultures throughout North Carolina and the South.

The clearest examples of this in western religious tradition are the dietary laws of Kashrut laid down in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus in the Old Testament.[64] These laws ascribe sacredness and profanity to certain foods and combinations of foods. These dietary restrictions are an example of Durkheimian negative rituals, and in this case they define religiosity through food. The Old Testament seeks to separate foods into clean and unclean categories—a separation that parallels Durkheim's sacred and profane. The designation of barbecue styles as chosen and rejected—"sacred" as opposed to "profane"—is a form of dietary

[63] Quesada, 1

[64] The irony in discussing Jewish kosher traditions to describe the ritual treatment of barbecue does not escape me. If anything, it strengthens my opinion that even "foreign" cultures are remarkably similar to each other. It illustrates the power of foodways as a field to parallel facets of different societies over distances and throughout time.

restriction. By belonging to the eastern cult, for instance, one is expected to reject all other barbecue as unfit for consumption. The creation of food boundaries demarcates cultural differences and clarifies Levi-Strauss' structural approach. The choice of barbecue becomes a religious choice for its followers.

In order for meat to be considered kosher in Jewish tradition, it must be slaughtered in a particular way and blessed by a rabbi. Similarly, adherents to each barbecue cult believe that only the pit masters of their clan are able to competently "bless" the pork with the correct cooking techniques and anoint it with the particular spices and sauce which make that brand of barbecue "kosher." The role of pit masters as priests or rabbis, blessing the congregation's food, highlights the religiosity of barbecue.

Chapter 6: Barbecue as a Lens I—Opposition Culture

Barbecue is a significant cultural symbol that teases out important tenets of North Carolina life and culture. The concept of dual organization, introduced earlier in reference to barbecue, is universal, but especially visible in North Carolina. We see how the barbecue myth reveals two distinct and opposing factions. Barbecue, in this sense, is culturally relevant to North Carolinians because it is yet another iteration of the oppositional South.

Consider the southern "plantation myth," created in large part to combat the ideals of the anti-Confederate North. Historian Richard Harwell suggests that southern identity was a reaction to the perceived threat of northern aggression in the 1850s and 1860s.[65] The North, then, has always been the profane anti-South as long as a notion of the sacred South has existed. The opposition between the North and the South, particularly regarding slavery and the slave trade, existed before the Constitutional Convention.[66] This issue remained prevalent throughout the early history of our nation and the opposition between the two regions manifested itself physically in the bitter buildup to the American Civil War. As W.J. Cash writes, "That conflict…was inevitable. It is not the nature of the human animal …willingly to suffer difference—that he sees in it always a challenge to his universal illusion of being the chosen son of heaven."[67]

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[65] Vandiver, Frank. *The Idea of the South*, 17
[66] Cobb, 9-33
[67] Cash, W.J. *The Mind of the South*, 60

Such was the power of this challenge from the North that the South separated itself ideologically and physically, establishing the region as distinct and in opposition to the other. The Civil War had a deeply divisive psychological effect on white southerners. After the war, freed slaves and white southerners were at odds politically. The war also affirmed the belief that the North was profane, existing solely to oppose the sacred South. Cash again,

> From pulpit and hustings ran the dark suggestion that the God of the Yankee was not God at all but Antichrist loosed at last from the pit. The coming war would be no mere secular contest but Armageddon, with the South standing in the role of the defender of the ark, its people as the Chosen People."[68]

After the war, the mind of the white South did not release the notion of its sacredness in opposition to the North. On the contrary, Reconstruction and the increasing nostalgia of the Old South myth contributed to separateness. Surviving Confederate soldiers returned home to ruined farms, worthless money, and memory of Sherman's cruel march. The South lost the legislative power it once held in the United States government, and the North became firmly entrenched in the southern mind as the anti-South.

The white southern response to occupation was physical, ideological, and most importantly, emotional. The South did not change its perspective on race or on the North. Rather, the region submerged itself in its history. The result was the Old South, the mythic South of a white plantation aristocracy. The emergence of the Civil War as a "Lost Cause" in the hearts and minds of southerners suspended the South in a remembered past. The plantation myth served to keep the South separate from the North. This separation is preserved in continued political and cultural oppositionality.

[68] Cash, 80

The barbecue myth in the contemporary South follows this trend by firmly grounding barbecue in the region. While barbecue festivals such as New York City's Big Apple Barbecue Block Party and Danny Meyer's Blue Smoke restaurant exist in the North, the heritage of barbecue is undeniably southern. These northern events and establishments showcase the folkloric cultures of Texas, St. Louis, Kansas City, Tennessee, and the Carolinas. To some southerners, it can even be bothersome to mention New York City on the list of places where barbecue is available. The sense of ownership southerners have towards barbecue makes imagining it in the North irksome. They cite the fact that in the North the word barbecue is a verb, referring to grilling burgers and hot dogs, while in the South, good barbecue is a noun—a true art form that contributes to a sense of community. Although southerners who move out of the South carry their food traditions with them, it is difficult to have truly southern food without a southern community. Southern barbecue mythology is regionally inclusive and in many cases, oppositional to the North. This contributes to a sense of regional nostalgia and protection, not unlike the myths of the Old South.

Barbecue oppositionality is best understood by examining the South's racial struggles. "[The racial] definition of southern identity effectively excluded the South's black residents in much the same way that both black and white southerners had been 'othered' out of the construction of American identity,"[69] writes historian James Cobb. It was the disagreement over slavery, after all, which originally divided the country in the mid-nineteenth century. The fight over the South's "peculiar institution" vilified the North and its people in southern eyes. Cash explained the mindset of the region:

[69] Cobb, 5

> Let a Yankee abolitionist be caught spreading his propaganda in the land, let a southerner speak out boldly his conviction that the North was essentially right about the institution, and…At the very luckiest, he had to stand always prepared to defend himself against assault.[70]

Racial hierarchy was a sacred institution of the South threatened by northern abolitionism. Through the defense of slavery, we see "the South," to use Cobb's language, "[become] a cause."[71] The opposition between black and white southerners was a battle between white southern notions of sacredness and profanity. Slavery, and later Jim Crow, codified racial opposition, but the ritual representations of opposition like the display of the Confederate battle flag were also important in defining the sacred/profane struggle in the Southern psyche.

To unpack the ways in which racial opposition can be explained by the Durkheimian paradigm, it is easiest to focus on the ritual representation of racial distinctness in the South. Durkheim presents the idea of negative rituals as the application of sacredness in opposition to profanity in totemic religion. Although ritualistic celebrations are, in a sense, positive rites, they are negative for our purposes because they represent opposition to the other race. Recall that barbecue culture in North Carolina involves the same types of rituals to promote a specific barbecue cult. Fitzhugh Brundage's research into black public celebrations after emancipation is useful in examining this distinctiveness. At the same time that organizations like the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Daughters of the Confederacy created reminders of white southern sacrifice, newly emancipated blacks created public memories of their own pasts. Without a doubt, these attempts were ritualistically

[70] Cash, 89
[71] Cobb, 34

opposed to the notion of white sacredness. They also inspired opposition from southern whites. Brundage explains:

> The resentment that southern whites vented every Fourth of July, the mocking derision that they showered on black commemorative spectacles, and the frequency of legal and extralegal harassment directed against black revelers leave little doubt that whites understood that the rituals of black remembrance represented a form of cultural resistance.[72]

During holidays, parades, and speeches, the black community came together to celebrate the end of slavery and the power of blackness in opposition to oppressive whiteness. In so doing, blacks not only gave cultural significance to their freedom by creating public traditions of social unity, but also downplayed white mythology and public memory. Brundage argues that:

> Commemorative celebrations…provided a forum in which to inveigh against white racism before the gathered black community. By criticizing white America, blacks claimed for themselves and their audiences a position of moral authority that made them, not whites, the true exemplars of the civilization in the nation.[73]

Black identity as seen through public commemoration was thus an inherently oppositional ideal. This oppositionality, combined with Jim Crow discrimination and the enduring display of the Confederate battle flag defined racial struggle in the South. These practices are Durkheimian rituals which clearly define sacredness in racial terms. By creating and propagating oppositional identities, black and white ritual holidays and practices have ascribed sacred and profane characteristics to the races. In the same way, obviously with far less at stake, barbecue's mythic qualities have spread and been adopted due to the creation of distinct and oppositional

[72] Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *The Southern Past*, 59
[73] Brundage, 96

barbecue identities. Barbecue is thus an iteration of internal southern opposition and an important symbol of southern culture.

Chapter 7: Barbecue as a Lens II—Ethnographies

Fitzhugh Brundage explains that societies "seek to remember by creating 'attics of memory,'" places that retain an acute sense of ethnic identity.[74] Few places signify and maintain a collective southern identity more than barbecue events and restaurants. Though the North Carolina barbecue restaurants featured in this paper represent a small fraction of the thousands of unique barbecue traditions in North Carolina and throughout the South, they nonetheless are important sites of historical and cultural information. It is important to note that the role of barbecue in southern society extends well beyond these restaurants and the white southern history that they reference. The restaurants featured here are all white-owned, not because any conscious choice, but because they embody characteristics I wished to explore. They symbolize the eternal conflict between the mythic Old South and the industrial New South. They emphasize the importance of labor to the southern economy and the necessity of adaptation, tradition, and perseverance for black and white southerners. Through these restaurants and their pit masters, the South comes into focus as a rapidly changing place grounded in strong traditions.

<u>Allen and Son Barbecue: Chapel Hill, North Carolina</u>
"You do what you have to do and I'll do what I have to do."

[74] Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. "No Deed But Memory," *Where Memories Grow*, 3

Keith Allen, fifty-two, who owns and operates Allen and Son Barbecue in Chapel Hill, grew up on a farm in Chatham County. Allen's grandparents were full-time farmers, and in his youth he helped them sell produce at a farm stand at the local market. When he began working for his father as a young teenager, he learned how to tend barbecue coals in the family's modest diner in Eastgate, North Carolina. He also helped his father at his restaurant by doing small chores like sweeping the floor and washing dishes. He also learned how to tend a barbecue pit at the restaurant. His father's business had a small barbecue operation to compliment the burgers and hot dogs that it sold in higher quantities. By the time he was a college student, Allen already owned a landscaping business. Always a hard worker, Keith Allen saved enough money to buy his own restaurant, the current Allen and Son building, at the young age of nineteen. Allen saved, worked, and improved his condition without extra help.

To understand Allen's southern roots, one must understand the history of labor in the South. Evidenced by Thomas Jefferson's virulent defense of the white farmer in the early decades of the country's existence, agriculture was central to the South's economy. Even after the decline of indentured servitude in the South, non-slaveholding whites represented up to three quarters of white farmers in the antebellum era.[75] Although these farmers dreamed of becoming members of the landed and slave-owning white aristocracy, that dream was never a reality for poor whites living off a few acres of exhausted land. They had no slave labor, so all harvesting was done by the farmer and his family. Social attitudes of the white plantation class towards white yeoman farmers were disdainful at best. Hinton Rowan

[75] Paterson, 250

wrote in 1857 that in the South, "no kind of labor is either free or respectable. Every white man who is under the necessity of earning his bread, by the sweat of his brow…is treated as if he was a loathsome beast and shunned…"[76] This attitude reflected a widely held belief among white Northerners and plantation owners that poor whites were lazy, rude, shiftless, and irresponsible. Other sources reveal a hard-working and pious ideal of yeomanism dedicated to upward mobility.[77] This type of white labor is the kind that Mr. Allen most closely resembles.

Keith Allen embodies the white working-class South. His silver hair speaks to the thirty nine years he's spent tending the pits at his Chapel Hill restaurant. Allen wakes each morning before 3 am to chop oak logs behind Allen and Son along NC 86 between Chapel Hill and Hillsborough. His first words the morning of our interview were "you do what you have to do and I'll do what I have to do."[78] The single-minded dedication that Allen shows to his work is deeply reminiscent of the hard work of black and white field hands throughout southern history. "If I can't make someone drive five miles down [NC] 86 to come get my product, then I'm not working hard enough and I shouldn't be in business," he said.[79] At one point, Allen owned two restaurants. He employs a full-time staff of eight and he operates a landscaping business on the side. His work ethic sets Allen apart from others speaks of his white, working class roots in North Carolina.

This work ethic follows a clear line of descent from white yeoman farmers in the antebellum era. It speaks to his roots in a farming family, his economic reliance

[76] Paterson, 255
[77] Paterson, 252
[78] Allen, 2006
[79] Ibid.

on his own labor, and his ingenuity in creating opportunity for himself. This last quality is evident in the way Allen describes the beginnings of his barbecue business. "I didn't really think about learning; it being anything special," he said. "I was doing it so I could eat…survive. As a job."[80] His statement highlights the importance of food in the working-class South. Pork was central to the southern agrarian tradition, and it is appropriate that Allen's work involves the South's signature food. Allen's emphasis on economic survival echoes the condition of white yeomen in southern history.

Barbecue was never part of Allen's family history, but he adopted the craft as his own and has been extremely successful. His own labor was necessary for survival, and Allen depends on it for his livelihood to this day. He does not live on a farm or sell produce as he did in his youth, but Keith Allen labors tirelessly. Allen prepares the barbecue, side dishes, and desserts by himself each morning before dawn. His workers include a small number of waitresses, dish washers, assembly line workers, and occasionally, catering servers. Most barbecue restaurant owners do not chop their own wood, fire the coals, or tend the meat by themselves, but Keith Allen does. For the past thirty-eight years, Allen has worked nine hours each day to prepare his barbecue and other dishes. His hard work does not go unnoticed. "I come here because I know exactly who made my food, and I trust him," said one customer.

Allen believes that success is only achieved by hard work, and he has no sympathy for the lazy. Sharing a story about another restaurant, Allen said "I just don't respect a place that has to buy their food from somebody else."[81] When he

[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.

talked about obese customers, he said "Sometimes, somebody will walk in the door, and I'm thinking, 'they don't need anything to eat. Last thing they need to do is eat. They need to run around the restaurant or something.'"[82] Allen's opinions about hard work shape his ideas about immigration as well. Allen said illegal Hispanic immigrants are "good at making something small take a long time…They use the language barrier to their advantage, and it takes five of them to do one man's job."[83] Allen's racial comments precisely reflect his white working-class roots. When Allen's contribution to North Carolina barbecue is viewed in this context, it transcends a simplified stereotype of barbecue. Instead, Keith Allen is one of many pit masters who contribute to southern culture and southern history by representing a unique and complicated folkloric tradition.

The Skylight Inn: Ayden, North Carolina
The Barbecue Joint: Chapel Hill, North Carolina
Tradition vs. Innovation

Ayden is a small town in eastern North Carolina. Like most small North Carolina towns, the main street has a pharmacy, a hardware store, and several churches. Local residents buy their groceries, gas, and appliances in nearby Greenville, just a few minutes down the road. Ayden appears untouched by the twenty-first century. "That old-time feeling" is palpable in one of Ayden's two barbecue restaurants, The Skylight Inn. Declared the "Barbecue Capital of the World" by *National Geographic* in 1988, four United States Presidents have dined here. The Skylight Inn operates much the same as it did sixty years ago; the menu includes

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

three items: barbecue, slaw, and cornbread. Nothing else is prepared in the kitchen, nor has it ever been. Jeff Jones' attitudes about progress and change in his barbecue restaurant echo another era's voices, when white southerners criticized industrialization after the Civil War.[84]

In 1947, brothers Robert and Pete Jones began the Skylight Inn in Ayden, North Carolina in an octagonal building with three tables and nine bar stools at a counter. Although Robert and Pete have since died, their sons, Jeff and Bruce Jones, run the business today as if it were still the 1940s. Sixty-one year old Jeff Jones is a seventh generation pit master. His family's barbecuing tradition dates to the 1830s when men in his family first prepared barbecue for church conventions. Barbecue was eaten at most white community gatherings in the area, and the Jones' boys were the ones to call. Jones' father had his own smoke house behind the family's home place across the street from the Skylight Inn building. His ancestors were farmers and Jones remains committed to agrarian ideals. As he puts it, "simplicity."[85] Jones uses paper trays in his restaurant, and only switched to a fountain beverage machine because Pepsi stopped producing returnable bottles. The Skylight Inn does not charge tax and they do not take credit cards or checks. Jones is proud of their simplicity and honoring the ideals of his barbecuing forefathers. When asked about the possible expansion of his restaurant into a brand, he said "my forefathers wouldn't believe in

[84] In its clearest form, this opposition came from a dozen scholars at Vanderbilt University known as "the Agrarians." In 1930, they published *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, an anti-northern, anti-industrial manifesto of southern agrarianism. They argued that communion with the land was essential to southern identity. While the majority of white politicians were intent on making the factory the new symbol of southern prosperity, the agrarians believed that agriculture and traditional ways were best for the region.

[85] Jones, 2007

that."[86] Adherence to tradition and a sense of continuity are of the utmost importance at the Skylight Inn.

One hundred twenty-six miles away, the chalkboard menu at The Barbecue Joint, in Chapel Hill, changes every week. Seventy percent of the Barbecue Joint's business is barbecue, but the restaurant also serves fried eggplant, barbecued catfish, and the "Killer Kowaslki Platter," a combination platter of smoked kielbasas, cider braised cabbage, a potato latke, and apple-beet relish. The two approaches to barbecue at the Skylight Inn and The Barbecue Joint represent the evolution of southern identity. If The Skylight Inn is old, then the Barbecue Joint is definitely new. The owners differ in their approaches to barbecue and the appeal of each restaurant is drastically different. Yet both serve barbecue and are considered two of the best barbecue restaurants in the state. They are the culinary equivalents of the Old and New South, each representing "*the* southern food" in markedly different ways.

The transition from old to new is embodied by Damon Lapas, the owner of The Barbecue Joint. Lapas grew up in Kinston, North Carolina, and remembers making the short trip to the Skylight Inn frequently in his youth. Although Jeff Jones' restaurant was Lapas' first exposure to barbecue, the owner of the Barbecue Joint has veered from the Skylight Inn's strictly traditional path. Lapas is much younger than Jones, and in contrast to the veneration Jones shows his native town and family history, Lapas has no family barbecue history. "Eastern North Carolina was just stagnant. I needed to get out," he said.[87] For Lapas, getting out of eastern North Carolina meant taking advantage of the opportunities at the New England Culinary

[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

Institute. Impatient with what he described as the "pretentious horse shit" at the Institute, Lapas left and became part owner in Henry's Restaurant in Chapel Hill.[88] Lapas eventually traveled to Vietnam, followed by time in Portland, Oregon and San Francisco. After years of working in up-scale restaurants around the country, Lapas returned to Chapel Hill to fulfill his dream of opening his own barbecue "joint."

With a friend of thirty-two years, Lapas did just that in a brick complex in residential Chapel Hill. There are no old Coca-Cola signs out front and no wood shed or smoke house in the back. The barbecue is cooked in a gas smoker with a box at the bottom for wood chips instead of in wood-fired pits. The restaurant's success is thanks in large part to its location; a place one would not necessarily expect to find a thriving barbecue restaurant. Instead of a charming main street, the Barbecue Joint is flanked by a suburban bagel shop, a tae-kwon-do studio, an insurance office, and a gas station. The houses down the road from Lapas' restaurant can sell for five hundred thousand dollars or more. "Where I am in Chapel Hill is a liberal, cosmopolitan place. My menu matches that feel," he said. "You're not going to find a barbecued duck salad on the menu at any other barbecue restaurant, but around here, people are willing to try it. They're more open and liberal."[89] One of the Barbecue Joint staff even works at the Lantern, the Chapel Hill pan-Asian restaurant featured in such publications as *Gourmet Magazine*, *the New York Times*, *Food and Wine*, and *Fine Cooking*. Lapas relies on constant innovation to sell his product in a non-traditional barbecue market. "We're always creating something new when inspiration

[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

strikes or when there are cheap ingredients around," he said. "All these things here on the menu, they're just there to amuse me."[90]

Lapas and his staff break the conventional barbecue mold. Their focus on innovation and progress over tradition is not dissimilar from the white, southern industrialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lapas has applied much of his culinary training in New England and across the country to barbecue in much the same way that progressive southerners of the New South embraced northern methods of industrialization. Lapas and his staff at the Barbecue Joint are continuing the legacy of the New South Creed, changing, adapting, and even abandoning traditional practices in favor of progress.

Stamey's Barbecue: Greensboro, North Carolina
Lexington Barbecue: Lexington, North Carolina
Southern Family and Community

The folkloric process of passing down traditions is embodied by Stamey's and the barbecue family C. Warner Stamey began. The western-style barbecue tradition was largely spread throughout North Carolina by Stamey, an apprentice of Jess Swicegood, and the original pit master and owner of Stamey's Barbecue in Greensboro. The current owner of Stamey's Barbecue in Greensboro is Chip Stamey, Warner's grandson. The Stamey's tradition began with his grandfather's large family in Shelby, North Carolina. Warner Stamey, born in 1911, was raised by his older sisters, who lived in Lexington. It was there that he learned the craft of barbecue from Swicegood, a pioneer of the western-style of barbecue. After Stamey bought Swicegood's barbecue stand a number of years later, it became a training ground for

[90] Lapas, 2008

many of the masters of North Carolina barbecue. In 1953, Stamey moved his barbecue operation to Greensboro. At the height of his business, he owned four restaurants: two in Greensboro, one in Asheboro, and one in High Point. The two Stamey's restaurants in Greensboro are still open today. The first is recognized as the oldest restaurant in Greensboro and is a beloved community gathering place.

Stamey's history is well documented and visible to every customer. It is a literal "attic of memory." Old black and white photographs line that line the walls reveal the building looks the same today as it did when it first opened in 1953. There are pictures of Chip Stamey with his customers, but also with President George W. Bush during a surprise visit to the restaurant in 2006. Bush's visit spoke of the venerated position Stamey's holds in Greensboro history. The importance of family and community has always been central to southern society. It is evident in the emphasis southerners place on "southern hospitality." Stamey's continues to provide this hospitality and community to their customers in the present day. Family recipes and food traditions have always been passed down orally by one generation of cooks to the next. Because barbecue is a folkloric art, the Stameys' methods of barbecuing are also passed down as part of oral and vernacular traditions. Sharing these methods and continuing the barbecuing legacy creates and preserves family and community memory through Durkheim's concept of contagion.

In addition to being a part of the Greensboro community, Stamey's creates community and family within its own walls. The business is in its third generation of Stamey family management. Many of the staff has been there for decades, as well. Mike Davis, a white man in charge of day to day pit operations, has been employed

by the Stamey family for more than thirty years. Many of the waitresses have been at the restaurant since the 1970s. Stamey's offers their employees benefits, including profit sharing and health. For a restaurant employee, these benefits are almost unheard of, but as Chip Stamey said, "it's the least we can do for members of the family."[91]

The Stamey family stretches far beyond Greensboro. Across western North Carolina, a generation of celebrated white pit masters can trace their barbecue roots back to the Stamey family. Perhaps the most celebrated of this group is Wayne Monk, the seventy-one year old owner and former pit master of Lexington Barbecue in Lexington, North Carolina. Monk's ties to the Stamey family are important to the restaurant and its heritage, but the relationships he has cultivated with his staff and the people of Lexington are even more important to understanding southern family and community in the barbecue business. All aspects of Monk's enterprise are family-oriented. He employs fifteen of his family in the kitchen and in the dining room. Wayne's two daughters, their children and husbands, his brother, and his children are involved in the business.[92] Most of them are behind the counter every day. Although Wayne Monk is still the boss, his family members take on more and more responsibility as he gets older. In many ways, this is the classic picture of a white, working-class, southern family. In a more agrarian past, large families shared hard work. Successive generations built on the accomplishments of previous generations, as Monk's family has done and will continue to do for the foreseeable future.

[91] Stamey, 2007
[92] Monk, 2007

The employees that are not blood relatives are like family. In some cases, three generations of the same family have worked for Monk at Lexington Barbecue. Most of the waitresses live in the neighborhood. As one of them said, "we fight like family and we forgive like family."[93] Monk is as generous to his employees as the Stameys are, and provides insurance and a system of profit sharing. The truest indication of the loyalty of the Lexington Barbecue staff is the constant praise they shower upon Wayne Monk and his legacy. "He demands perfection from us and we give it to him," said Susie Kepley, a long-time waitress at the restaurant.[94] Kepley's bragging about her boss would embarrass Monk. She spoke of the prestigious James Beard award that Monk won, the long hours he puts in each day, the many newspaper articles he has been featured in, and most of all, his kindness.

The customers at Lexington Barbecue are also treated like family. Monk constantly patrols the dining room during lunch hours shaking hands and visiting. For the customers, Lexington Barbecue is more than a restaurant; it is also a gathering place. Consider "the generals," three elderly white men who come in every morning, before the restaurant opens to drink coffee and talk politics. The restaurant was also an after school "hang-out" for Davidson County students when Monk used to stay open until two in the morning. The restaurant is still a popular lunch spot for high school students during the week. Every customer is always greeted heartily whether they are regulars or first-timers.

The counter at the front of the restaurant seats ten people on barstools who visit as if they know each other. In some cases, they do. Lexington has suffered

[93] Kepley, 2007
[94] Ibid.

significant losses in the textile industry. People are close here because they share the same worries. Even those who do not know each other feel part of an important heritage at Monk's restaurant. Some patrons still call the restaurant by its original name, the "Honey Monk." They refuse to let go of this name which shows they have been part of the community long enough to know the restaurant's early history. Up to four generations of one family have eaten at the restaurant since it opened in 1962. Lexington Barbecue is a true family, from the customers to the employees to the Monks. By creating a genuine sense of community within its walls, and by participating in the western-style barbecue folk tradition, Lexington Barbecue demonstrates the importance of family and place in North Carolina.

The Future

The four pit masters interviewed for this work shared concerns about the future of their restaurants and authentic barbecue. Wayne Monk is confident in the second generation, but added, "I'm not sure that we're going to be here in thirty years."[95] Keith Allen echoed that sentiment. Allen has one daughter, but when asked if she was his likely successor, he explained "kids these days don't need to do this. They have an education. Even if they wanted to do it, there ways of doing it a whole lot easier than this."[96] Even Jeff Jones, a man who values tradition and continuity, is uncertain about the future of his business after his nephew Samuel takes the reins. Chip Stamey demonstrates that traditions can continue. "Dad always wanted us to aspire to something different. I didn't exactly aspire to do this," he said. "I worked for

[95] Monk, 2007
[96] Allen, 2006

Apple [computers] and realized it was better to work for myself."[97] Whether it is a third generation Stamey continuing the barbecue traditions in his family or Damon Lapas blazing his own trail, barbecue, like the South, has a future. Traditional barbecue no doubt will evolve, but change, innovation, and perseverance create a thriving culture deeply attached to the past.

This uncertainty does raise an issue which confronts not only the contemporary South, but food cultures around the world in the twenty-first century. How do food traditions withstand commercialized trends and fast food expressions of "the real thing?" For barbecue, the threat lies not so much in the actual fast food as in the impact of the culture of fast food. It is more and more difficult to find the labor necessary to operate a traditional barbecue restaurant. Many in the next generation of potential pit masters are simply not interested in working as hard as Keith Allen or adhering to traditions like Jeff Jones. Many consider pursuing other, less demanding professions.

The customers will always be there, but as one Lexington Barbecue employee said, "times change. School kids come by to see us cooking, but they don't realize how much goes into it. We're not fast food, but we'll serve you fast. They get that confused now."[98] With fewer members of the next generation, interested in taking over these culinary traditions, the craft is in danger of disappearing and overwhelmed by commercialization.

[97] Stamey, 2007
[98] Wright, 2007

Conclusion

In "Deciphering a Meal," Mary Douglas writes that "If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries…the taking of food has a social component as well as a biological one."[99] Regional foodways make this "food code" a reflection of the region, its people, and its values. Barbecue does this for the South. Part of the code is revealed through Keith Allen, Jeff Jones, Damon Lapas, the Stamey family, and Wayne Monk, but there are many yet unexplored ways to view the South through barbecue.

Future studies should explore the role of women in southern barbecue at places like B's Barbecue in Greenville, North Carolina. Researchers should address the role of sustainability and concern for the environment as seen at Parker's Barbecue in Wilson, North Carolina. There is much to be explored at barbecue events outside of restaurants, such as church fundraisers, and holiday celebrations that feature barbecue, such as Easter meals. The role of African Americans in contemporary North Carolina barbecue culture both as pit masters and as barbecue consumers is a crucial area of needed research. I hope to explore these important facets of southern barbecue in the future.

[99] Douglas, 249

A foodways approach to southern cultural studies debunks many of the mythic representations of the South that permeate present-day views of the region. The South is no stranger to myth, as seen in the region's deeply valued symbols and mythic views of the past. The symbolic nature of barbecue in the South transforms the preparation and eating of food into religious rite and ritual. Instead of relying on a mythic, commercialized understanding of barbecue, I have chosen to view in its cultural context and reclaim barbecue as a folkloric art and tradition beloved by the people of North Carolina for generations. My interest in writing this paper was to delve deeper into a South that I am not a part of historically but consider myself to be a part of culturally. To discover parts of southern society that reach beyond everyday representations of our region makes this tie stronger. I am convinced that barbecue is one of the things that make the South "southern." It embodies so much about a palpable, but truly unexplainable southern way of life. Although people will continue to define the South through race, economics, politics, and the like, maybe, as I wrote earlier, it is as simple as barbecue.

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