

“Aura, Habit-Memory, and Commodification in the Twilight of Traditional Cooking”

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*"[T]here are lieux de memoires, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire real environments of memory[...].Lieux de memoire originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally[...].We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. Conversely, if the memories that they enclosed were to be set free they would be useless; if history did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no lieux de mémoire. Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces lieux de mémoire—moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded" (Nora, 1, 6).*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is a wistful and commonly heard lament: "Things don't taste like they used to." Is this really true? Does food somehow taste different than it did in the past? Why do we long for the food of bygone days? Is food a more important marker of identity and vector for memory in some cultures than it is in others? For example, in Italy today, foods (both mass-produced and artisanal) are frequently marketed with taglines such as *genuino, prodotto tipico, tradizionale, and come una volta*. What has created the nostalgia for traditional foods and a demand for so many self-proclaimed, so-called authentic products?

As the world undergoes rapid globalization, traditional food cultures are in decline. Along with changes in agricultural practices, new health code regulations, more women moving into the workplace, and the availability of a wider variety of foods as well as changes in dietary preferences, artisanal products and traditional home-cooking have become less the norm and more the exception to the rule. Cooks learn their skills from television programs and cookbooks, internet sites and food

magazines, but less frequently do they acquire culinary knowledge passed down from their grandmothers and mothers. Speed and convenience have become valuable to working professionals, and traditional cooking has become impractical and outmoded. I would argue that traditional food culture (all over, and for the purposes of this essay, specifically in Italy) is, in what Andreas Huyssen calls in his book, *Twilight Memories; Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, “the twilight of memory.” (Huyssen, 3). In his introduction, Huyssen claims that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have become obsessed with remembering and anxious about forgetting. He uses the term “twilight memories” to refer to “generational memories on the wane due to the passing of time and the continuing speed of technological modernization” (Huyssen, 3).

Despite its diminishing prevalence, however, the importance of traditional cuisine as a marker of cultural identity has not declined. In this discussion of the waning of traditional food culture, I will demonstrate how food can act as an important repository of cultural memory and how the preservation and commodification of traditional foods serve to satisfy a desire for authenticity in the context of an increasingly globalized food culture. I will consider Walter Benjamin’s idea of the “aura,” and I will investigate whether the key ideas from his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” and some shorter essays and articles he wrote about food, can help us to interpret the nostalgia for, and changing role of, traditional foods and cooking.

With the absence of traditional cooking at home, the demand for authenticity is projected onto the public culinary landscape. The marketing power of labeling a

food product or brand traditional or authentic is quite strong. Identifying foods as typical, local, authentic, or traditional makes them desirable objects to consume in order to connect with one's cultural identity or (for outsiders to a culture) to take part directly in the culture of another. This kind of "anchoring" of a food product within the context of a tradition is an essential element of remembering our own individual and collective identities. Food as an identity marker and site of memory "becomes even more important as the territorial and spatial coordinates of our [...] lives are blurred or even dissolved by increased mobility around the globe" (Huysens, 7).

Because food is a medium through which memory and cultural identity can be conveyed, it is an object that has the capacity to inspire nostalgia. The loss of traditional cooking (a vector for cultural memory) in the private sphere leads to a public anxiety over the loss of a collective cultural identity. The anxiety over the loss of identity leads to a drive to preserve traditional cuisine, which in turn leads to a commodification of it that inspires even more nostalgia.

In presenting this argument, I acknowledge that identity and memory are very complex terms that have spawned unresolved debates, both philosophical and psychological, as well as sociological in nature. I cannot resolve those debates in this analysis, and therefore I will assume these terms to have conventional meanings: identity refers to how we perceive and define ourselves as individuals and as part of a group, and memory is the process of and by which we retain, recall, and remember information and past events. Nostalgia is also a potentially ambiguous term, which

here I use to refer to a wistfulness or yearning for a return of some past period or irrecoverable condition.

Before being able to discuss the nostalgia for traditional cooking within the context of Benjamin's theories, however, there are some important questions to resolve: Why is food such an important medium for collective memory making? Food is the centerpiece for many collective memories because it is the focal point of so many festivities, family gatherings, and social events. Traditional foods and traditional cooking techniques act as "traces [or vestiges]" which "provide [...] access to another time and place" (Halbwachs, 188). National and regional cuisines, family recipes, and local specialties become identity markers for us, and we become attached to them because of the complex emotional and social associations we make with them. In his essay, "Food, Self, Identity", French sociologist Claude Fischler states:

Any culinary system is attached to, or part of, a world view, a cosmology. Man eats, so to speak, within a culture, and this culture orders the world in a way that is specific to itself. It operates a kind of generalized implicit taxonomy, in which food classifications have an important place [...]. It is clear therefore that culinary systems play a part in giving meaning to man and the universe, by situating them in relation to each other in an overall continuity and contiguity (Fischler, 281).

By what means then does cuisine inform identity and memory? I argue that cooking and eating are activities that rely not only on the mind, but also on the body in order to remember. In *Remembering: a Phenomenological Study*, Edward Casey states, "there is no memory without body memory," (Casey, 172). I would build upon Casey's statement by saying that there is no identity without memory. From this, I suggest that there is no identity without body memory.

Body memory is reliant on the physical practices that inscribe memory onto the body. In *How Societies Remember*, his influential book on memory, Paul Connerton describes this embodiment of memory as a process called “incorporation”. Fischler asserts that cooking and eating are essential to how we form our identities both individually and in groups. Like Connerton, he speaks of “incorporation” as it relates to the physical act of eating. He claims:

To incorporate food is, in both real and imaginary terms, to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat. Incorporation is a basis of identity. The German saying, ‘*man ist, wass man isst*’ (you are what you eat), is literally, biologically true; the food we absorb provides not only the energy our body consumes but also the very substance of the body [...]. Incorporation is also the basis of collective identity and, by the same token, of otherness. Food and cuisine are quite a central component of the sense of collective belonging [...]. Human beings mark their membership of [sic.] a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat (Fischler, 279-280).

Later in this analysis, I will argue that the complex relationship between the body, memory, and identity is forged through the process of incorporation. I will discuss the concept of body memory, habit, and ritual in more detail, looking specifically at the theories put forth by Casey and by Paul Connerton, among others.

An iconic example of body memory is Marcel Proust’s often cited “episode of the madeleine.” In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust’s novel containing the famous madeleine reference, Marcel experiences a rush of long-forgotten memories as he eats a madeleine cake. Just as Proust’s Marcel did upon taking a bite of that famous madeleine, we have all experienced the wave of involuntary memories that flood our minds when we taste or smell something that has left an impact on us in our past. Proust expresses the power that the faculties of taste and smell can have in

cementing memories into the body that survive over time with more durability than other memories:

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remained poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection (Proust, 50).

Eating food is necessarily a sensory event, and preparing it, serving it, and consuming it can all be performances with some element of ritual involved: while we eat, we experience a combination of smells, textures, and flavors which are imprinted into our bodily memory, and we correlate the sensory experience with the emotional and physical circumstances of the situation in which we feel them. Just as Proust's madeleine jogs Marcel's memory, specific foods can immediately remind us of when, where, and with whom we ate them first. And, just as Marcel is spurred by eating to remember, so others, too, often experience nostalgia for lost circumstances through food.

Nostalgia is the key element that connects food to Benjamin's concept of aura. Nostalgia associated with a particular food arguably intensifies its aura, and in turn, its growing aura intensifies the nostalgia. It is my view that because of the ephemeral nature of food, the longing to reproduce a specific food experience can never be satisfied, which guarantees the original food object (even if it no longer exists) an auratic quality.

Before entering into a detailed discussion about how Walter Benjamin's ideas about aura apply to food, however, I will briefly describe what Benjamin means by



the term “aura.” I will then explore to what extent Benjamin’s idea of aura can be applied to food, and, indeed, how he himself seems to have implied as much in several essays he wrote years before he wrote his 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”.

In determining why and how, in its decline, traditional cooking has acquired an ever-increasing aura, I will provide a framework explaining how food and cooking serve as vectors for cultural memory by inscribing memory into the body. I will then explore whether this argument about an ever-increasing aura can be applied to the organization Slow Food’s activities in regard to the conservation of traditional food in Italy. Slow Food, like many other Italian organizations that aim to preserve the country’s culinary patrimony, sees Italy’s cultural heritage as being embodied in its authentic food.

Using Slow Food as a case study, I will demonstrate how preservation efforts and the re-invention of food traditions encourage the fetishization and commodification of traditional food products, severing them from daily ritual and their traditional contexts, making them *lieux de mémoire* (Nora). Pierre Nora describes *lieux de mémoire* as sites where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself [...] the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (Nora, 1). His distinction is particularly pertinent to my argument about traditional foods: “There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory” (Nora, 1). I will show how taking these food items out of their traditional contexts

ultimately increases their aura, and how, precisely as Nora claims, these auratic objects “mark the rituals of a society without ritual [...]”(Nora, 6).

## II. WALTER BENJAMIN'S NOTION OF "AURA" AND FOOD

In order to discuss ideas about food and nostalgia using Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, we must first examine how Walter Benjamin originally used the term aura and determine whether and to what extent the term can be applied to food and cuisine and in what ways the application may be problematic. Benjamin's concept of aura is difficult to define, and Benjamin himself leaves room for many questions about what aura actually is and where it resides.

In 1936, Benjamin wrote "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," perhaps his most famous essay; it was first published in the May issue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Broderson, 221). Here, I will refer to the second version, a longer essay closer to what Benjamin originally intended the work to be. The originally published version was a shortened version that was translated into French (Benjamin, 122). In the second version of the essay, Benjamin introduces the concept of aura, calling it a "strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" (Benjamin, 104). He describes aura as the uniqueness and mystique that was originally associated with the cult value of religious art. The "embeddedness" of a work of art within the particular religious ritual is responsible for the existence of aura. In the case of aura and religious art, the difficulty the faithful encountered in accessing religious relics (embarking upon long pilgrimages, visiting but never actually seeing a relic) helped to endow the objects with more powerful auras. By making pilgrimages to these

auratic objects, believers took part in remembering and paying homage to this heritage.

Benjamin claims that auratic objects embody a specific cultural heritage and memory, which lends them authenticity that, allegedly, cannot be reproduced. Key to the presence of aura is the “here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place,” a quality that is “jeopardized by reproduction” (Benjamin, 103). “It is highly significant,” he says, “that the artwork’s auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function” (Benjamin, 105).

In discussing the concept of aura, Benjamin wrote about the effect new technologies had on the production and reception of art and, therefore, on the presence of aura in the original work. His essay, written during the years in which National Socialism flourished in Germany, is clearly politically charged. Benjamin, who supported Marxist ideals and was extremely critical of fascism, saw the aura as a potentially dangerous thing that could reinforce the hierarchy in society by attaching cult value to items that were owned and controlled by an elite few at the top of the hierarchy. He thought of technological reproducibility of art as a positive development, because it could be useful in weakening the authority of the elite and revolutionizing the use of art as a political tool. Benjamin thought that technological reproducibility could be an equalizer, allowing the “cult value” of art to give way to its “exhibition value” thus “emancipat[ing] the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual” (Benjamin, 106).

Concerned primarily with photography and film as works of art, Benjamin identified the complications that arise from the viewer’s inability to distinguish a

reproduction from the original: according to Benjamin, “Photography calls into question...the authority of the original” (Snyder, 161). He states, “The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art” (Benjamin, 116). Joel Snyder pinpoints the crux of Benjamin’s argument:

New methods of production engender new means of depiction because they bring about specifiable changes in the perception of the world. Art itself is intimately involved with the expression of perception. In a period of technical, industrial production in which the work of the hand is given over to the machine, the character of human perception—at least the perception of those who maintain and run the machines—the workers—changes in accord with the manner of production (Snyder, 159-160).

For Benjamin, photography and film, both new media in his day, represented a “change in the function of art” (Benjamin, 109), a fundamental shift in the way we see the world. Benjamin believed that the existence of identical copies fundamentally changes the way the viewer perceives and relates to a photograph. Photography and film allow for a new way of seeing, capturing images of objects, people, and events in ways they could not be seen by the naked eye.

He saw photography and film as a way to respond to the fascist “aestetization of politics,” by “politicizing art” and undermining the cult value of art that arises from aura (Benjamin, 122). To Benjamin, the “camera can ‘test’ the world” and “reveal unsuspected aspects of reality [...]. Thus, when used by an eye informed by a sensibility that perceives the similarity of all things, photography becomes anti-auratic, opposed to tradition, in a word, ‘revolutionary’”(Snyder, 167).

Benjamin’s description of the aura implies that when we encounter an auratic item, we experience a longing to get close to a certain quality it embodies, but we also experience that quality’s equally present inaccessibility. According to

Benjamin, the “social basis for the aura’s present decay [...] rests on two circumstances[:...]. Namely, *the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction*” (Benjamin, 105, italics his). In Benjamin’s view, there exists an inverse relationship between the accessibility of an object and its aura—the more available it is to the masses, the less of an auratic “veil” (105) it can maintain. This relationship is not unlike that of the famous law of supply and demand as expressed by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*; the less a product is available to the masses, the more the demand for it exists. The “merit” (value) of the product would increase as its “scarcity” increased (Smith).

Although applying Benjamin’s theory of aura to food may prove to be useful, it is not without a few problems that I will address. The first problems occur in Benjamin’s own text. What exactly *is* the aura, and where does it reside? Is the aura an objective, quantifiable thing? Or is it an intangible property that exists only as a sociological phenomenon, a result of human perception? Benjamin offers the example of photography to show how “the existence of the aura is conditional on the social context” (Todd, 104). Because technological reproduction allows for many identical copies of a photograph, it “substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence” (Benjamin, 104). Benjamin says clearly that the “changed circumstances may leave the artwork’s other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the here and now of the artwork” (Benjamin, 103).

For the purposes of this analysis, I contend, following the work of Snyder, that this aura of authenticity is “perceived as properly belonging”(Snyder, 164) to

objects, artworks, and food, but “has no immediate physical counterpart outside the human brain and cannot be explained biologically” (Snyder, 164). Since the aura does not truly reside “in” these places and foodstuffs, the auratic status of these things must be attributed to the “stimulative capacity of ideas” (Snyder, 164). With food, as with art, the aura is not an actual empirical thing, but instead it is a sociological construction that exists in the mind of the nostalgic eater/consumer. Indeed, the taste, aroma, and other physical properties of food are empirical, measurable qualities of the food that vary from item to item, but they themselves do not constitute the aura, they merely stimulate the perception of it.

When we consider the idea of exact reproduction, we encounter additional problems in applying the theory of aura to food rather than to photography and art as Benjamin originally intended. What kinds of foods can be said to have the power to produce an aura? In this discussion, I will talk about traditional foods—foods (both single products like cheeses and particular dishes or preparations) closely associated with a particular ethnicity, place, production method, or way of life.

To what extent can a particular food be reproduced in the way that Benjamin asserts that photographs and film can (with absolutely no discernable difference between the original and a copy)? I would argue that a traditional food item cannot, in fact, be exactly reproduced outside of the context of its tradition or outside of its provenance. Unlike a photograph, which can be produced in many copies from the original negative, even heavily regulated, mass produced food made in factories (Cadbury chocolate, for example) is subject to variation. As soon as a food product leaves a factory, the effects of the climate, transportation, and storage, (among other

variables) can change the quality of the food (the chocolate could melt, for example, or absorb the scent of garlic that it sits next to in the convenience store).

Variation in food quality is even more likely in the case of traditional foods made by hand. One must take into account the variation in the quality of fresh produce from season to season, human error, humidity in the kitchen, variations in oven temperature, etc. Even in artisanal processes that are strictly standardized, as with the production of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese in Italy, variation is inevitable. Although the consortium that oversees the production of Parmigiano Reggiano clearly limits the region of production, strictly specifies the variety of feed for the cows, and meticulously defines the rules for manufacturing, no one wheel of cheese can be the same as the next because the nutritional content of the cows' diets is different in summer than in winter, one batch of milk may be slightly higher in fat content than the one before, and finally, one shelf of cheeses may be aged slightly longer than another before it is deemed ready by the official inspector.

Because of internationally distributed cookbooks, internet cooking sites, standardized recipes and widely available ingredients, it is possible that certain items can indeed be made in exactly the same way all over the world, but these facsimiles are not the same as the exact technological reproductions which Benjamin associates with photography and film. Even if I were to follow a traditional recipe, the *pesto alla Genovese* I could make in my own kitchen will never be the same as the *pesto alla Genovese* I would eat on the Ligurian coast, regardless of whether or not I am able to tell the difference between the two in a blind taste test.



The element that makes these two pestos fundamentally different is the concept of *terroir* or *territorio*. (*Terroir* comes from the French word *terre*, meaning land.) Originally used to describe the special characteristics of wines from particular vineyards, the term is now often used to discuss the influences that the soil, altitude, and other environmental factors have on a product that is produced in a particular place. The “real thing” must originate in the context of a specific place and be made according to a specific practice in order for it to qualify as authentic. The *terroir* concept contributes to the aura of the item. *Terroir* can be compared to what Benjamin calls the “here and now” of an artwork, a condition essential for the presence of aura. He says, “In even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art [...]. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject” (Benjamin, 103). That is to say, a product’s *terroir* brings about the unique qualities that contribute to the item’s aura.

At this point, it is important to reiterate that even in circumstances where particular foods have absolutely unique and un-reproducible physical characteristics, I do not consider the *aura* of the original to be a tangible or quantifiable quality that resides in the food itself. It can vary in intensity according to the various social circumstances in which consumers perceive the product. Nevertheless, the effect *terroir* has on food is *not* an imaginary or socially constructed concept. Regional factors *do* objectively contribute to how some food or drink tastes, looks, and smells. This fact can make it difficult to differentiate between objectifiable qualities of the food and the way we perceive those qualities as aura.

However, as I clarify above, these quantifiable differences in the quality of the food do not *constitute* the aura, they merely *contribute* to the perception of uniqueness that encourages the aura to exist.

Food and eating experiences rely exclusively on the idea of the “here and now” to intensify their auras. “The here and now of the original underlies the concept of its authenticity, and on the latter in turn is founded the idea of a tradition which has passed the object [or experience] down as the same, identical thing to the present day” (Benjamin, 103). It is important to point out that food, unlike art, is by its very nature perishable. Benjamin says that “uniqueness and permanence are closely entwined” (Benjamin, 105), implying that the permanence of an object is essential for the presence of an aura, but I argue that in the case of food, permanence is not necessary. Therefore, although the “here and now” directly affects an eater’s experience, an object does not necessarily have to rely on physical permanence (as does a religious relic or a work of art) to convey its aura throughout the successive generations. The perishability and impermanence of food bolsters the argument that aura cannot reside in a food itself but in the complex cultural context of its consumption. The aura, therefore, relies on a group’s collective memory about a food’s cultural significance and the way in which that memory is perpetuated by associating the food with stories, communal eating, celebrations, etc.

Just as a particular food cannot be exactly reproduced, a particular eating experience or, in fact, a particular cook cannot be copied. Nostalgia for a food or culinary experience intensifies its aura, and in turn, its growing aura intensifies the nostalgia and longing. I argue that because of the complex sensory relationship

between food, identity, and memory, the longing to reproduce a specific food experience can never be satisfied, which guarantees the original food object (even if it no longer exists) an auratic quality.

In his essay, Benjamin highlights the importance of ritual and habit in the reception of art and the maintaining of an object's aura: "It is highly significant that the artwork's auratic mode of existence is never entirely severed from its ritual function. In other words: *the unique value of the 'authentic' [...] always has its basis in ritual.*" (italics Benjamin's, 105). He claims, "The uniqueness of the work of art is identical to its embeddedness in the context of tradition." If we apply this idea to food, however, we encounter a contradictory situation.

Samuel Weber highlights the potential contradiction in Benjamin's thought process:

There is the very real possibility that aura will be reproduced in and by the very media responsible for its 'decline.' What is clear from Benjamin's discussion, even though he does not say it in so many words...is that aura thrives in its decline, and that reproductive media are particularly conducive to this thriving (Weber, 45).

What Weber means here is that modern technology, like photography and film, but also recordings, digital media, and other mechanical forms of mass-production that Benjamin could not have anticipated, actually fuel the formation of an object's aura by making people aware of an original. Benjamin's argument applies specifically to exact reproductions of photographs and film, (reproductions that cannot be distinguished from the original at all) but I argue that even inexact reproductions, facsimiles of a traditional food product, can serve the same function. For example, photographic reproductions of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" may be circulated widely in

books, on the internet, and elsewhere. The ubiquitous presence of the image of Van Gogh's painting makes people aware that there is an original and increases their desire to view that original first hand. This apparent contradiction, intrinsic to Benjamin's concept of aura, can be illustrated in the following example: If you reproduce (though not exactly) a product and disseminate it around the world, (pesto on the shelves of American supermarkets, for example) you indeed take it out of the context of tradition, but by reproducing the pesto and spreading it among a population who otherwise would have no access to the original, you also raise awareness about the existence of an authentic item. This raising of awareness causes a longing for the authentic item, and in this way, the "real thing" acquires an ever-increasing aura. For example, tasting how delicious *pesto alla Genovese* made in a food processor can be only increases the desire to experience how much more special it would be to taste the *pesto* which is made painstakingly by hand, ground to a paste using a mortar and pestle, and made from basil that is grown in Liguria. This increased interest in accessing the authentic item augments its aura.

Expanding upon the changes that photography and film impose on the production and perception of art, Benjamin makes a point about photography as compared to painting that is equally relevant to my argument about the mechanized mass-production of traditional foods that are taken out of the context of tradition. He argues that, though the outcome of mechanized reproduction may be exactly the same, the process by which an object is produced has changed. This proves especially true if you consider the mechanical mass-production of a food that is customarily made by hand. If you take the item out of the context of tradition, "what

is reproduced is a work of art [in this case food], while the act of reproducing it is not" (110).

*My fundamental claim is this: In this case, the aura of a particular item increases because its importance as a repository of memory has increased in the absence of the physical ritual that conveys the memory.* Handmade pasta is a good example of a food that acts as a repository of cultural memory in the absence of physical ritual. Even if we cannot discern a difference in the way an artisanal pasta tastes compared to the taste of an industrially made pasta, we know that someone made it in the traditional way, and by purchasing and eating the hand-made product, we feel we are able to connect to a culture and a traditional community that is not accessible to us when we eat the mass-produced version.

Before he wrote about aura in his "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin himself wrote about food memories and nostalgia and, although he never uses the term aura in relation to food, he appears, nevertheless, to have understood the power of food's auratic qualities. Incidentally, a number of Benjamin's essays refer to eating experiences in Italy, a place where Benjamin traveled frequently throughout his life. Benjamin's first long journey away from his family was a trip to the north of Italy in 1912; it was an extremely formative experience for him although he had many negative reactions to the country. In 1924, Benjamin returned to Italy for six months to escape the economic hardship of the Weimar republic and the growing influence of National Socialism. This stay "was a turning point in his life that had a lasting influence on his writing" (Broderson, 135).

In a series of essays entitled “Food,” published in 1930 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Walter Benjamin describes some intense physical and emotional experiences he has had with food and conveys the centrality of those foods in cementing certain memories. In the same manner as Marcel experiences the madeleine in Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Benjamin recounts memories of events and places that are inextricable from memories of food. In Benjamin’s case, the foods are figs in Italy, café crème in Paris, borscht in Russia, and wine and stockfish in a working-class neighborhood in Rome.

In each short essay, Benjamin describes a memorable auratic experience. It is important to point out that only Benjamin himself could have had the auratic experiences he tells of, because his experiences with these foods were deeply personal. This implies that, as opposed to the aura of art, which Benjamin says is perceived by the masses, aura as it relates to food can be a personal, subjective perception. For Benjamin, each auratic experience is reliant on food and eating, but the aura in each case does not necessarily reside in the food itself. Benjamin’s opening to his short piece, “Café Crème,” highlights how essential he deems the “here and now” to be key to understanding the true café crème experience in Paris. In the case of the café crème, it is Benjamin’s physical surroundings in combination with the coffee itself that embody the aura. He says:

No one who has his morning coffee and rolls served up to him in his room in Paris on a silver platter, together with little pats of butter and jam, can know anything at all about it. You have to have it in a bistro where among all the mirrors, the *petit déjeuner* is itself a concave mirror in which a minute of this city is reflected (Benjamin, 359).

In another story about an experience he has had in an Italian woman's kitchen, the aura associated with the eating experience is the aura of the cook, not the aura of the food itself. He describes the memorable and completely compelling experience as having far less to do with the taste of the food itself than with the woman who cooked and served it to him:

How little you would understand of the magic of this food, and how little I understand it myself [...]. To taste it was of no importance. It was nothing but the decisive yet imperceptible transition between two moments: first between the moment of smelling it, and then of being overwhelmed, utterly bowled over and kneaded, by this food, gripped by it, as if by the hands of the old whore, squeezed, and having the juice rubbed into me—whether the juice of the food or of the woman, I am no longer able to say (Benjamin, 362-363).

In his concluding food essay, "Mulberry Omelette," Benjamin acknowledges to his readers that he may have incited their desires to experience the same food experiences that he had, but he cautions that those desires will never be able to be fulfilled—that the foods of those experiences are not reproducible precisely because of the multifaceted and complex nature of the aura that is associated with food. He recounts a fable about a king who wishes his cook to recreate for him a wonderful omelette he enjoyed eating at a meaningful time in his childhood:

It was not long before the mulberry omelette stood before us. Scarcely had I put the first bite in my mouth than I was overcome by a wonderful feeling of solace and new hope. In these days I was still a child, and it was not until long afterward that the memory of the blissful taste of that precious dish came back to me. But when, later on, I had my whole empire combed in search of the old woman, she was nowhere to be found, nor was there anyone who knew how to cook the mulberry omelette.

In response to the king, the cook wisely explains that the king's nostalgic longing cannot be satisfied:

Of course I know the secret of the mulberry omelette and all the ingredients that are required, down to the common cress and the noble thyme. I also know the words you have to say while stirring, and know that you have to whisk the boxwood beater from left to right, for fear that otherwise all the labor will prove to have been in vain. But for all that, O King, I shall still forfeit my life. Despite all my efforts, my omelette would not taste right to you. For how could I spice it with all the tastes you enjoyed in it on that occasion: the dangers of battle, the vigilance of the pursued, the warmth of the hearth and the sweetness of rest, the strange surroundings and the dark future.

From this tale, we can see that Benjamin keenly understood that the nostalgia-inspiring, auratic quality of foods, the unique qualities of certain culinary experiences, as with art works, are contingent on residing in the “here and now” (Benjamin, 103), and that the unique experience of consuming particular foods in particular situations cannot be reproduced.

To reiterate simply, the connection between “art aura” and “food aura” is as follows: Benjamin sees mechanical reproduction and modern technology as causing a profound change in the public's reception of art objects that were once perceived to be unique and authentic:

*It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And, in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition (Benjamin, 104).*

My logic in using Benjamin's essay as a framework and his term aura in the context of food, memory, and nostalgia is a similar argument: the mass production and



dissemination of mechanized versions of traditional foods changes the function of traditional foods in society, shifting our perception of them, and severing them from traditional practices. However, my view on food differs from Benjamin's about art, because I believe that this separation from traditional practices enhances nostalgia that intensifies the aura of the original traditional product. Benjamin believed that technological reproduction brought about a decline in aura; I see it as causing an item's aura to increase.

As with a piece of religious art or an artifact, a country's cultural heritage and cultural memory can be embodied in its authentic food. Food preparation and consumption are rituals and habits that inscribe memory onto the bodies of the eaters and cooks. The perceived authenticity associated with aura means that foods prepared with particular methods, by particular people, in particular locations, and even particular food preparation equipment and recipes, may be "auratic" in that they incorporate this heritage and act as sites of cultural memory. Because food is such a powerful source of body-memory, and because identity requires memory, cuisine informs identity. Food, therefore, becomes a tool for collective memory-making and a *lieu de mémoire* for cultural heritage and identity. Because traditional food culture is becoming less and less integrated into our everyday lives, the loss of the body memory associated with traditional food and cooking creates a loss of a collective cultural identity. This inspires nostalgia for specific food products and preparations and drives a market for the mechanized mass-production of traditional foods that become widely disseminated facsimiles of the authentic item, increasing the nostalgia and longing for the "real thing." This nostalgia gives these foods and

culinary traditions a new function as sites of memory and increases the aura that is associated with them. This aura leads to an increase in food tourism, cookbooks about traditional foods, and food memoirs.

### III. COOKING AND THE BODY; INCORPORATING, IDENTIFYING, AND REMEMBERING

*“Images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are sustained by ritual performances, and that performative memory is bodily. Bodily social memory is an essential aspect of social memory” (Connerton, Preface).*

In order to support the claim that traditional food items acquire an intense aura in the eyes of consumers when the traditions surrounding food preparation are removed from the consumers’ everyday lives, we need to consider in more detail what effect the practices surrounding traditional food production have on the collective memory and identity of people who form a particular cultural group. In order to better understand the connections between food, memory, and aura, we need to delve more deeply into the concepts of ritual and body memory. In using the term “body memory,” I mean to refer to “memory that is intrinsic to the body, to its own ways of remembering: how we remember by and through the body” (Casey, 147). It is by repeating actions, “being in the situation itself again and feeling it through our body...[that the] body acts as a receptacle of memories” (Casey 147, 178).

In this section, I will examine how “the memorization of culturally specific” movements such as techniques for cooking and habits for consuming food are what Paul Connerton calls “*incorporating practices*” (italics Connerton’s, 72). Some incorporating practices, he says, can be less formalized than the performances associated with religious ritual (Connerton, 79), but nonetheless, serve to inscribe memory into the body. He correlates the mnemonic relevance of the “relatively

informal [...] culturally specific bodily practices [...] with the relatively more formal [...] commemorative ceremonies [...]" (Connerton, 102).

In *How Societies Remember*, his seminal work about commemorative practices and communal memory, Connerton claims:

We [...] preserve the past deliberately without explicitly re-presenting it in words and images. Our bodies, which in commemorations stylistically re-enact an image of the past, keep the past also in an entirely effective form in their continuing ability to perform certain skilled actions [...]. Many forms of habitual skilled remembering illustrate a keeping of the past in mind that, without ever advertent to its historical origin, nevertheless re-enacts the past in our present conduct. In habitual memory the past is, as it were, *sedimented* in the body"(Connerton, 72).

One could take issue with the unempirical way in which Connerton presents his theories about incorporating and inscribing acts and body memory. Although his argument is very persuasive and frequently cited by scholars of memory, Connerton asserts his views without providing any relevant psychological evidence that would be necessary to back his claims about memory and the body; nevertheless, Connerton is one of many cultural and social theorists and philosophers (Foucault, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Casey) who have contemplated the question of how the body remembers without grounding their arguments in empirical medical and clinical data, and his view is convincing as an explanation for memory's relationship to the body. Moreover, in their article, "How Bodies Remember," Kleinman and Kleinman take issue with "psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience-all fields that should have a fundamental interest in at least the processes of incorporation"- for not having adequately engaged with "the study of the processes that mediate and transform the bodily forms of social experience [...]"(Kleinman and Kleinman, 711).

Therefore, for the purposes of my argument, I will rely on these social and cultural theories even though they could be bolstered by more scientific underpinnings.

If we consider that the routines and “long familiar movements of artisans” (Connerton, 94) involved in traditional food preparation are indeed performances and practices that rely heavily on skills and knowledge acquired habitually by the body—the subtle flick of the wrist that is required to quickly form a particular pasta shape from a lump of dough, the ability to recognize that a mixture is the proper temperature without the aid of a thermometer, the motion necessary for properly slicing a leg of ham— we can accept what Connerton claims about the effect bodily practices and habits have on collective memory and can easily apply it to the artisanal practices involved in traditional cooking: “The availability of particular gestural repertoires in the hand movements of individuals [in a] group depends largely on their history, their cultural belongingness; and [...] tacitly recalls the memory of the communal allegiance” (Connerton, 82).

By repeating movements such as pinching the dough of a dumpling around the filling using the thumb and fore-finger or the skill involved in stretching strudel-dough across a table into pastry so thin a newspaper placed underneath it can still be read, cooks engage in culturally specific performances that help them identify with the culture to which they belong. It is possible to approach an interpretation of memory and the body from a semiotic perspective, claiming that only within a social context do we assign cultural meaning and significance to bodily performances, and that without cognitive activity, bodily performances cannot independently exist as signifiers. However, as Michael Jackson writes in his essay addressing the concepts

of body knowledge, the “meaning of body praxis is not always reducible to cognitive and semantic operations [...] Thus an understanding of a body movement does not invariably depend on an elucidation of what movement ‘stands’ for [...] To treat body praxis as necessarily being an effect of semiotic causes is to treat the body as a diminished version of itself” (Jackson, 329). Jackson further maintains that the “distinctive modes of body use during initiation tend to throw up images in the mind whose form is most immediately determined by the pattern of body use” (Jackson, 336).

Following the line of reasoning that physical performances can act as memory triggers without needing to have been previously assigned cultural significance, we can see how the behaviors surrounding cooking can act as transmitters of memory. More than engaging in a physical behavior devoid of meaning, by cooking, people

are reminded of something with cognitive content. But [...] it is through the act of performance that they are reminded of it. Bodily practices of a culturally specific kind entail a combination of cognitive and habit-memory [...]. In the performances explicit classifications and maxims tend to be taken for granted to the extent that they have been remembered as habits. Indeed, it is precisely because what is performed is something to which the performers are habituated that the cognitive content of what the group remembers in common exercises such persuasive and persistent force (Connerton, 88).

Connerton explains how compelling body memory is as a mechanism for transmitting cognitive memories. The “mnemonics of the body” (Connerton, 84) serve as cues for the conscious mind to associate with a personal or cognitive memory. He clarifies that these kinds of bodily “memories consist simply in our having the capacity to reproduce a certain performance [...]” (Connerton, 23). He

goes on to emphasize that regarding these memories, “we frequently do not recall how or when or where we have acquired the knowledge in question; often it is only by the fact of the performance that we are able to recognize and demonstrate to others that we do in fact remember.” (Connerton, 23).

In describing his experiences working alongside villagers during field work in a Kuranko village, Jackson makes a strong case for the power of embodied knowledge and for why “ritual action [can] accord such primacy to bodily techniques [.]” He emphasizes how “bodily movements can do more than words can say” (Jackson, 338). He observes:

Thus, to stand aside from the action [...] led only to a spurious understanding and *increased* the phenomenological problem of how I could know the experience of the other. By contrast, to participate bodily in everyday practical tasks [...] helped me grasp the *sense* of an activity by using my body as others did (Jackson, 340).

In discussing cuisine’s effect on the formation of cultural identity, Fischler also explores the concept of food preparation and eating as performance and incorporation. If we accept that body-memory requires the act of incorporation in order to exist and that “the principle of incorporation underlies [...] human attempts at control over the body, the mind and therefore over identity” (Fischler, 280), then we can extend this logic to conclude that body-memory itself also plays an essential role in the cementing of both personal and collective identities. “Thus, [...] it can be said the absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and therefore into the group which practices it” (Fischler, 281).

In order to understand how cooking as an act of incorporation inscribes memory onto the body and contributes to the formation of identity, let us consider

the words of an Italian cook, one of three interviewed for the American cookery magazine, *Saveur*, in 2008. The three women were asked to talk about their recipes for *Ragu' alla Bolognese*, a dish traditionally made in the Northern Italian city of Bologna. As she described her experience making *ragu'* in the traditional way, each woman became immediately nostalgic without having been prompted to talk about the memories she associated with making the dish.

For Alessandra Spisni, owner of the cooking school *La Vecchia Scuola Bolognese*, the recipe for *ragu'* is dictated by history. She explains how she cannot remember learning the skill of making the classic sauce, how acquiring the knowledge to make *ragu'* is, as Connerton asserts, “nothing more than the unreflective following of a tradition of conduct in which [she has] been brought up.’[...] learned [...] by ‘living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner’”(Connerton, 16). As her story demonstrates, “we acquire such habits in the same way that we acquire our native language” (Connerton, 16). For Alessandra, the recipe is intimately connected with the memory of her grandmother. She does not remember the process of making *ragu'*, because her memory of the recipe relies on automatic and embodied physical performance:

Ragù was traditionally made at home, so every version—if it has been passed down for generations within a family—is as authentic as the next. My grandmother was born in 1890 in Bologna ... and she's the one who taught me the recipe. I don't remember any one lesson in particular. I learned it like I learned to talk, little by little. It's very traditional (Halpern).

We can see from Alessandra Spisni's description of her recipe for *ragu'* that, for her, the act of cooking the dish plays a role in defining who she is and where she fits in relation to former generations of her family, her city, and her cultural identity. Her



embodied knowledge of her grandmother's recipe grounds her in a tradition. Spisni is an example of how

by using one's body in the same way as others in the same environment, one finds oneself informed by an understanding [...which] remains consonant with the experience of those among whom one has lived. [... B]odiliness unites and forms the grounds of an empathic [...] understanding (Jackson, 340-341).

Before we move on to examine the change in meaning and function that traditional foods undergo when they are no longer connected to the preparation practices that integrate them into the everyday life of a given group, let me summarize the complex ideas I have put forth in this section. The body acts as a repository for knowledge by repeatedly performing certain tasks, skills, or ceremonies. In the performance of this repetition, the body incorporates a memory. The movements of the body, in turn, act as cues for conscious memories. Traditional cooking is a ritual or performance that requires the "incorporation of habitual knowledge. To master such skills, "to have a habitual knowledge--one might equally say a remembrance [...] is to have [...] 'an embodied way' [...] which can be accomplished only through 'a long course of incorporation'" (Connerton, 93).

In addition to being the vehicle through which conscious memory is transmitted, embodied knowledge is key in the formation of a collective identity. Traditional cooking "exercises control over everyday living, the body and its behaviour" (Fischler, 290) and functions as just such a system of behavior whereby the cook identifies and transmits knowledge and memory within her culture.

If we accept that cooking is indeed an important mechanism by which cultural memory is transmitted from generation to generation, it is logical that the oral traditions and domestic practices that go along with the production of

traditional foods must be present in order for the traditional culinary knowledge to be kept alive and for the memory that contributes to cultural connectedness to be passed along. Experts, usually in the form of the older generations in the community, must be present in order to transmit the relevant skills.

Postural behaviour, then, may be very highly structured and completely predictable, even though it is neither verbalized nor consciously taught and may be so automatic that it is not even recognized as isolatable pieces of behaviour. The presence of living models [...] is essential to the communication question" (Connerton, 73).

Because cooking and food preparation are the kinds of physical performances in which habit-memory can reside, it follows that with the disappearance of traditional cooking, the performances and rituals that sustain a sense of cultural belonging also disappear.

In the absence of experts who have embodied the traditions unique to a particular cuisine, the logical way to preserve the culinary heritage is by recording and cataloguing recipes or by standardizing traditional food production with a set of rules. I contend that because cooking is a medium through which memory and identity are conveyed, and the loss of traditional cooking skills and practices in the private sphere leads to a public anxiety over the loss of a collective identity, this anxiety manifests itself, as I will demonstrate in the next section, in an obsession for preserving national culinary patrimony by archiving and promoting traditional foods.

The fixation with conservation by way of archiving traditional products, however, fails to account for the fading prevalence of traditional cooking and underestimates the importance of "*ceremonies of the body*" (italics Connerton's, 84).

Ceremonial avocations [...] display membership of an ancient group. These avocations represent an investment of time and skill in a particular type of symbolic capital: the objects endowed with greatest symbolic power are those which display the quality inherent in the possessor by clearly demonstrating the quality required in their appropriation. Objects of symbolic [...] capital are [...] locked into the whole life history, and therefore the memories, of those who possess them. For part of the point of what is possessed is precisely that it cannot be managed by leading a life independently of the specific demands of what is possessed. And part of the point of what is possessed is that it is not independent of the past context in which it was acquired [...]. All these competencies are ancient, they can be learned only slowly, they can be enjoyed only by those who take their time, they manifest a concern for things that last. These require that one occupy one's time not economically but ceremonially. Ceremonial avocations [...] affirm the principle of hereditary transmission" (Connerton, 84, 87).

Without the everyday performance of traditional food preparation techniques, traditional food items themselves come to act as important representations or repositories of cultural memory and thereby acquire a mystique or an aura that they otherwise have not previously had. In the absence of the physical routines that connect us, through our bodies, to a particular cultural tradition, we replace that connection by simply eating the auratic item, engaging in "the incorporating act par excellence, consumption" (Connerton 84).

#### IV. SLOW FOOD: TRADITIONAL FOOD AS AURATIC RELIC

There are many cases throughout the course of history when food and drink have taken on particularly important symbolic, social, or political significance, (The Boston Tea Party, Marie Antoinette's "Let them eat cake!") but there is no room in this analysis to review the many different historical contexts in which food has played an important role. My assumption in this paper is that the recent fixation with consuming traditional foods indicates a desire for connectedness to traditional culture and authenticity in the context of an increasingly globalized food culture and a more globalized world. By eliminating the performances associated with preparing traditional foods, but retaining the act of consuming traditional foods, "not only does the eater incorporate the properties of food, but, symmetrically, it can be said the absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and therefore into the group which practices it" (Fischler, 281).

In order to illustrate how traditional food products acquire aura, I will focus on the international organization Slow Food as a case study, arguing that in systematically preserving and promoting traditional food items, Slow Food encourages the obsession with and commercialization of them, while removing them from the physical performances with which their preparation is connected, thus placing them in physical and cultural contexts outside their original traditional spheres. By dissociating them from their original purposes, Slow Food alters the

function of these foods, transforming them from everyday items into *lieux de mémoire*, representations of an already fading culinary heritage.

Slow Food was founded in 1989 in protest against fast-food culture, which the founders saw as infiltrating its way into Italian life. Although Slow Food has undergone enormous changes in its over thirty-year history, becoming a vast and complex international network with a myriad of initiatives, the focus of this study will be on its founding objectives. Slow Food's guiding ideology is set out in "The Slow Food Manifesto," written by founding member Folco Portinari in 1989, and sanctioned by fifteen member countries. It laments the loss of meaning that comes with the ever-increasing speed of modern life. The manifesto states:

Our century, which began and has developed under the insignia of industrial civilization, first invented the machine and then took it as its life model [...]. We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the...insidious... *Fast Life*, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods [...]. A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of *Fast Life* [...]. Our defense should begin at the table with *Slow Food*. Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking [...]. In the name of productivity, *Fast Life* has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes. So *Slow Food* is now the only truly progressive answer (a).

By the mid 1990's, Slow Food "began to imagine itself as an international organization concerned with the global protection of food tastes"(Leitch, 446). Its intent was to safeguard "endangered foods"(Leitch, 446) or artisanal items that were threatened by "trends towards farming monocultures, from the disintegration of traditional rural foodways, from pollution of water-ways, or from the dearth of alternate distribution networks" as well as a reaction against the "standardization and the imposition of new hygiene legislation, which would considerably diminish

the economic viability of many of these artisanal producers “(Leitch, 446).

Slow Food believes “that everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that make this pleasure possible” (b). In her 2003 article, “Slow Food and the Politics of Pork Fat,” Alison Leitch examines Slow Food’s values and cultural politics from an anthropological approach. She spells out the clear subtext implicit in Slow Food’s ideology: “the notion that memory is entangled in the senses and that through the sensory experience of rediscovering taste memories one recuperates and holds onto the past (Sutton 2001)” (Leitch, 455).

Despite Slow Food’s plea for people to slow down by enjoying the pleasures of the table and conserving the culinary treasures of the past, the “cultural politics of the Slow Food movement are not slow.” They are instead “filled as much with irony as nostalgia [...]. They are fast, concerned as much with the proliferation of images, as with the marketing of memory” and “with narratives of cultural loss...[that] fuel a deepening sense of nationalist nostalgia”(Leitch, 457).

Slow Food is by no means the only example of efforts in Italy to preserve the country’s culinary patrimony: *Accademia della Cucina Italiana*, Home Food, and *Casa Artusi* are just some of the other organizations that exist in Italy today. Because Slow Food has a number of diverse global initiatives and twenty-four years of history, I will limit my scope to one of many of Slow Food’s efforts. For the purposes of this argument, the focus will be on only the Italian Presidia within the Ark of Taste Project, (more specifically, only one presidia product, *lardo di Colonnata*) as well as Slow Food’s more general promotion of Presidia products.

The Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, a subsection of Slow Food's now multi-faceted organization, which aims to "defend local food traditions"(c), oversees both The Ark of Taste and the Presidia projects. The goal of the Ark is "to rediscover, catalog [sic.], describe and publicize forgotten flavors" (ibid.). The Ark of Taste, the name of which clearly alludes to the Old Testament story of Noah's Ark, is a catalogue of products that new technology, agri-business, and modern hygiene regulations seem to threaten. Seen to be "at the risk of extinction," they are singled out by Slow Food as "products that have real economic viability and commercial potential" (d).

Among the over 700 products in the Ark of Taste are those produced by communities that Slow Food calls "Presidia". These products are the main interest of The Foundation for Biodiversity. The Foundation offers the Presidia both economic and organizational guidance in order to improve production techniques and identify suitable local and international markets in which the products can be sold. In addition to economic improvements for the presidia, the foundation also focuses on cultural, social, objectives and environmental sustainability (e).

In order to better understand how Slow Food fuels nostalgia for a fading cultural heritage and imposes an aura on previously aura-free foods, let us consider one of Slow Food's most famous presidia products, *lardo di Colonnata*, the history and politics of which Leitch analyzes in detail in her essay on Slow Food. *Lardo* is an artisanal *salume*, or cured meat product, made in the Tuscan town of Carrara, famous for its white marble. The process of making *lardo* involves curing the back fat of special pigs in *conche*, or coffers, made of Carrara marble. Prior to Slow Food's

identification of it as an endangered food, *lardo* was virtually unknown outside of the community in which it was made. It quickly, however, became a favorite ingredient among internationally well-known chefs like American celebrity, Mario Batali (Buford). In the media, Carlo Petrini, the charismatic international president of Slow Food, compared *lardo* to “other objects of significant national heritage, including major works of art or buildings of national architectural note,” making it “a holder par excellence of national heritage” (Leitch, 446-447). In designating and publicizing *lardo di Colonnata* as “a key symbol of its ‘endangered foods’ campaign,” Slow Food made it a *lieu de mémoire*.

The preparation process of *lardo* is specific to place because it relies on the use of local Carrara marble, which has a “porosity [that] is clearly essential to the curing process as well as to *lardo*’s claims to authenticity” (Leitch, 446). In order for it to be technologically mass-produced in a manner that is consistent with European Union hygiene standards, the use of Carrara marble would have to be omitted from the process (thus fundamentally changing the nature of the product); nevertheless, the growing demand for the food soon inspired a number of *lardo*-like copies. Leitch summarizes how the publicity for *lardo* raised the public’s awareness of the product, endowed it with a mystique (aura) by designating it a culturally relevant item, associated it with nostalgia and memory, and finally, made it a commodity:

Ironically, the publicity surrounding [*lardo di Colonnata*...] amplified into [... a] threat: copying. [...] Partly as a consequence of Slow Food’s promotional campaign, a food which was once a common element in local diets and an essential source of calorific energy for impoverished quarry workers, has been reinvented and repackaged as an exotic item [...]. A product associated with a distinct social history and corporeal memory is now privately patented by a group of people who may be entitled to sell the recipe [...]. This is a story not of



the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) but of its commodification. The story speaks to how memory replaces tradition as we move from modernity into post-modernity, a process which writers on other culture industries, such as art and music, have tracked as the commodification of nostalgia (Feld 1995) (Leitch, 447-448).

We can clearly see how, through Slow Food's involvement, *lardo di Colonnata* has become an auratic relic. As a product whose production is inextricably tied to the "here and now", it is "deeply reminiscent of a shared past [...]. To eat lardo [...] is to remember and celebrate this past as collective history and corporeal memory [...]. Through its physical incorporation, memories of place and self are actually ingested" (Leitch, 445).

To further bolster my argument about how Slow Food's activities endow traditional foods with aura, we can examine one of the more direct ways in which Slow Food seeks to promote the products of the Italian Presidia through an agreement with a new high-end food hall called Eataly. Eataly, which opened its first store in Turin in 2007, now has five stores in Italy, three in Japan, and one in New York City. Eataly describes itself as "a unique market" selling "the highest quality of the Italian culinary tradition" and "a place that unites marketing and culture, selecting and offering the eno-gastronomic excellence of our country" (f).

In promoting the Slow Food products available at the store, Eataly describes the "over 145 Presidio products" it sells from "farmers, fisherman, butchers, shepherds, cheesemakers, bakers, [and] pastry chefs." Eataly's ostensible goal is to make available "the best artisanal products" while conveying "the face and the story of the many producers who make up the best of Italian gastronomy" (g).

In considering how Eataly's global commercializing of Presidia products

increases the aura of the products, it is helpful to remind ourselves of Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the mass dissemination of copies that technological reproduction encourages: "technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain... [enabling] the original to meet the recipient halfway [...]"(Benjamin, 103). The Italian Presidia products sold at Eataly are not strictly technological reproductions, nor are they even mass-produced. They are in fact made in the old-fashioned way. Nevertheless, they are severed from the bodily practices that integrate them into their original cultural context, and they are made available in places they otherwise would not be. We need only to consider the line which welcomes the visitor to Eataly's website, "*L'Italia e' mai stata cosi vicina. Italy has never been so close*"(i) to connect it to Benjamin's theory. He emphasizes:

The technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced [...] lead[ing] to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition [...] the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage" (Benjamin 104).

Away from their *terroir*, or provenance, these products lose some of their aura. In order for the aura and allure of widely distributed foods to remain fully intact, we must experience them by consuming them in their traditional locale.

I assert that by meeting the consumer in his own cultural context (in New York or in Tokyo), these products do not function as they do in their traditional contexts, but are examples of auratic relics that are, as Weber would say, "thriving in their decline". Instead, because globalized marketing of these products has made

them widely available, they inform the consumer about the existence of an “even more authentic item” and serve to increase that item’s aura in its place of origin. “For the aura is bound to its presence in the here and now. There is no facsimile of the aura [...]. Uniqueness [...] is identical to [...] embeddedness in the context of tradition”(Benjamin, 112,105).

By creating a database of traditional artisanal so-called authentic foods, promoting them, and making them available for purchase, Slow Food makes us nostalgic for them and endows them with an aura. We might ask ourselves, however, whether or not the narratives that Slow Food weaves about Italian culinary identity and history are in fact accurate, but “the issue is not only whether a collective memory construct is true or false, but also why it manages to convince” (Assmann, 50). Upon closely scrutinizing the goals of Slow Food and Eataly, one can clearly see that that the motives behind these ventures, at least in part, are truly to safeguard a culture in decline. Slow Food and Eataly’s efforts at culinary conservation seem to address the anxiety expressed in these questions:

If one does not know what one is eating, one is liable to lose the awareness of certainty of what one is oneself. How do modern foods transform us from inside? Are we in danger of losing control of ourselves through what we eat? In a food system (and a cultural system) that is in the process of being deconstructed and/restructured, how do we situate ourselves in the universe and the cosmos? (Fischler 290).

However, in isolating and commercializing the end products, making them available to the masses, rather than to those who produce the items, Slow Food’s initiatives fail to take into account “the importance of performance [...] for emphasizing, marking, defining a continuity from the past” (Connerton, 103).

There has been much scholarly work showing how culinary traditions have been largely invented for a variety of political and cultural reasons throughout much of modern Italian history (Dickie, Prasecoli), and therefore, Slow Food's fixation on food as national patrimony is a logical development in a narrative that has long included food as a marker of Italian culture and identity. The longing to have access to these authentic items is not surprising, because eating them makes it possible to consume Italian cultural heritage.

Each act of incorporation implies [...] a chance and a hope—of becoming more what one is, or what one would like to be. Food makes the eater: it is therefore natural that the eater should try to make himself by eating [...]. This is the clear consequence of the principle of incorporation: *if we do not know what we eat, how can we know what we are?*" (Fischler, 282).

With the effort to protect traditional cuisine in order not to forget "what we are," Slow Food's conservation by way of archiving "endangered foods" may actually re-invent an already imagined national cuisine by attributing new meaning and cultural significance to those foods. Labeling a food culture "traditional" could lead to an over-simplified version of it, which then becomes stagnant and crystallized in our memories. This fossilization of memory may actually allow for the loss of the habitual understanding and oral traditions that allow cuisines to change naturally over time as cooks re-create and re-define knowledge that has been handed down as part of a long-standing (but evolving) tradition. Moreover, by appropriating particular products as "endangered foods" and by promoting them and marketing them in a commercial context, Slow Food encourages a re-imagining of Italian culinary traditions and endows these products with a mystique or aura that they may not originally have had.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In this analysis, I have attempted to show how a longing for authenticity in an increasingly modern, globalized world has fueled initiatives to preserve traditional food products which, in turn, become fetishized, inspire nostalgia and acquire an aura that may not have previously existed. I claim that in abandoning the physical performances involved in traditional cooking, we lose the mechanism for conveying memory from generation to generation. Without traditional cooking, traditional food items have come to function as sites of cultural memory, and the aura associated with them is increasing.

My analysis is predicated on the theories about aura and art that Walter Benjamin writes about in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility." Like works of art or religious relics, traditional foods can act as sites of cultural memory and be perceived to embody a certain intangible mystique which I have described using Benjamin's term, "aura." Although many similar facsimiles of a food item can be produced and widely distributed, unlike the photographs or films that Benjamin discussed, a specific food item or experience cannot be reproduced.

I have diverged from Benjamin's theory that reproductions diminish the aura of the original by agreeing with Samuel Weber's argument that aura can thrive in its decline. Facsimiles (not exact copies) of a particular product can be widely distributed to meet the demand of consumers who seek to identify with a culture by consuming its food. These facsimiles, it could be claimed, raise awareness about the

food in question, thereby ensuring that the actual original food retains its aura or even acquires an aura it may never have had before.

I have explained how traditional cooking serves as a vector for cultural memory by inscribing memory into the body. Memory is embodied in the performances and rituals associated with traditional cooking techniques, and cultural heritage and identity are therefore conveyed through successive generations of cooks. With the loss of traditional cooking in the private sphere, anxiety over the loss of a collective cultural identity grows.

The anxiety over the loss of cultural identity leads to initiatives, like those of Slow Food, to preserve food traditions, which, in turn, create nostalgia for “endangered foods” that may have been relatively unknown prior to being conserved or archived. Using the examples of *lardo di Colonnata* and Eataly, I have applied my argument to Slow Food’s activities in Italy. I have attempted to show how Slow Food’s effort to protect food traditions encourages the fetishization of traditional food products by removing them from everyday life and their traditional contexts, thus endowing them with aura and transforming them into *lieux de mémoire*.

To support my views, I have relied heavily on the social theory of Paul Connerton, whose essay, one could argue, “is not a critical evaluation of the modern obsession with memory and the past” (Gable, 386); rather it is itself an example of theoretical nostalgia. My own argument may also reflect some of the nostalgia that is evident in Connerton’s views, although a preoccupation with memory and the past

has been a concern of many scholars, and especially one of importance for Walter Benjamin.

If Benjamin were to interpret Slow Food's activities, he would likely approach the new function of auratic traditional food "relics" with a Marxist perspective. Karl Marx's theories of alienation and commodity fetishism apply particularly well to this case. With his theory of alienation, Marx argues that a capitalist system removes workers from the products they produce, thereby impeding their self-actualization and separating them from others. The concept of commodity fetishism describes the way in which a commodity takes on a particular mystique because the work that is required to produce it is embodied by the object.

As Benjamin does with his concept of aura, Marx takes the idea of commodity fetishism from religion. According to Marx, as a result of the growth of capitalism, social relationships become expressed as, mediated by, and transformed into, objectified relationships between things (commodities, money, and in the case of my analysis, food). In the case of Slow Food, fetishized traditional foods take the place of the culturally significant social interactions that occur during the preparation and consumption of food in a traditional context. Like the concept of aura, commodity fetishism describes a form of social projection. It is the attribution of social qualities to an object and the consumer's erroneous belief that the object actually embodies these traits.

A Marxist interpretation of the increased aura associated with traditional foods would be the following: hand-made traditional foods are perceived as more valuable and more authentic because of the time-intensive physical performances

that producing them entails. In our society, one in which time is too scarce to produce food as we once did, we (the workers in a modern world) have lost our cultural identities by engaging in labor that is culturally non-specific. We buy back our cultural identities by purchasing authenticity in the form of a traditional food item. In doing so, we are actually buying the labor of the food producer, and the relationship between the artisan and ourselves is obscured by the auratic qualities we have attributed to the traditional food.

With an approach that echoes Marx's ideas, Fischler calls the modern eater a consumer and describes how capitalism and technology have alienated us from traditional food. He states:

The work of preparing food is...remote from the eyes and knowledge of the eater [...]. The sociocultural frameworks [...] which traditionally governed and constrained food have been considerably eroded by economic and technical changes in life-style [...]. Moreover, food technology [...] now uses more and more sophisticated processes tending to [...] imitate and transform 'natural' or 'traditional' products [...]. Modern food has become [...] devoid of origin or history, with no respectable past—in short, without identity. (Fischler, 289).

I believe that for all of their efforts, Slow Food, Eataly, and other ventures with similar goals, do not effectively address the dwindling prevalence of traditional Italian cooking and the culturally specific food knowledge of contemporary Italians. Slow Food aims to preserve tradition, but it inevitably ends up marketing it, therefore transforming it. The foods that Slow Food aims to protect become fetishized commodities, which stand in for the socio-cultural frameworks into which we are no longer integrated. Is there not a more effective way to remember



traditional food culture as the world continues to globalize and modernize around us?

In their comprehensive article on collective memory and mnemonics, Olick and Robbins highlight Walter Benjamin's awareness of an apparent dissolution of the structures that contribute to collective national memory. Benjamin observes:

The conditions for storytelling, "woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship" have lost their most basic support "because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while... [stories] are being listened to. [...T]he gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears" (Olick and Robbins, 118).

Since the "ambience of craftsmanship," "the community of listeners," and the social frameworks for transmitting culinary knowledge break down in the food world of today, are Slow Food's archiving and re-inventing of tradition, the best or only ways to remember our cultural heritage? In this discussion of the twilight of traditional cooking, it is not possible to offer an answer to this extremely complex question, but instead, I hope to have shed some light on the fetishizing as well as fossilizing effects that current attempts to preserve culinary traditions actually have on our memories. I believe that, ultimately, we should aim to find a more effective and less commercial way to sustain cultural identities.

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