POSTMODERNIST FACETS OF GLOBALIZED CULINARY IDENTITY

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Abstract. *The article reveals some postmodernist dimensions of the challenges related to the relationship otherness–culinary identity in today's globalized world. Thus, starting from the implications of the high interest for the relationship between food and identity, some examples of deterritorialization and reterritorialization are discussed, especially as concerns the transformation of local recipes into global reinvented ones. The focus lays also on the concept of hyperreal of taste and on the idea of simulacrum in relation to molecular gastronomy, to edible packaging, and to artificial food. Besides, the Foucauldian* power/knowledge *relationship is taken into account at the level of government, as well as at the level of mass-media. The conclusion is that the rising interest for the globalized culinary identity, constantly built and rebuilt kaleidoscopically, and characterized by fragmentarity, dispersion, and volatility can be a symptom of the necessity to regain some specific landmarks of individual and collective stability.*

Keywords: *culinary identity, otherness, hyperreal of taste,* power/knowledge *relationship.*

In the postmodern globalized world, the multiple processes of fragmentation and decentering, and the chaotic migration flows have led to the blend of cultures and traditions, behavioral and mental patterns. Consequently, the interest for the topics of identity and otherness, both at the individual and at the group level, has been highly increasing. Out of the polymorphous facets of identity, particular attention has been paid lately to culinary identity, perceived as one of the most important landmarks of individual and collective stability.

Nowadays, the literature regarding food and its role in the development of human society has gained more and more importance, as it can offer valuable answers to major individual or national identity issues (for instance, the conciliation role that food can play in the ethnic conflicts, the prevention of food security incidents, the fight against famine in certain parts of the world, the environmental impact of food production and consumption, the explanation of some pathological phenomena that have accompanied globalization, such as obesity, bulimia, anorexia).

The focus on culinary identity is quite new, truly starting only in the nineties, when "an explosion of superb scholarship on food occurred, spearheaded as usual by historians (…) but also by cookbook writers, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists" (Anderson 236). By comparison, in the academic world of the seventies and eighties the topics related to food, alimentation or gastronomy were generally considered a trivial, frivolous matter and "taking food as an object of study" was "something generally thought of as paradigmatically both consumable and mundane" (Ashley et al. 24), lacking any scientific value. In the *Preface* of his exhaustive study, *Food in History*, published in 1973, Reay Tannahill confesses that he "was mystified by the fact that no one had already written such a book. No one had written a world history of food across half a million years" (xi). His research revealed the important role food had always played in all fields of human development.

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Indeed, over the time, the search for better ways of obtaining food has led to important changes of the society in general and of local communities in particular. Thus, "food has acted as a catalyst of social transformation, societal organization, geopolitical competition, industrial development, military conflict, and economic expansion" (Standage ix). The idea is that the dynamics of the populations and of the civilizations have been most than often determined by new alimentary patterns or by the need of certain food items.

At the individual, group or national level, food has always been a significant identity marker. Thus, food was defined as "a product and mirror of the organization of society on both the broadest and most intimate levels. (…) Foodways influence the shaping of community, personality, and family" (Counihan 6). In this regard, the study of food practices of a certain individual or community can reveal significant information on the economic, ethnic, religious, and cultural or gender identity. Consequently, culinary identity can be considered a construct representing a totality of choices, preferences, and consumption behaviors transmitted within a group (regional or national, ethnic, social, religious, etc.), in a particular spatial and temporal context. At the same time, culinary identity reflects a cultural experience that is defining for specific values and traditions.

The interest for the relationship between food and identity could be an attempt to alleviate what Frederic Jameson called "the alienation of the subject displaced by the latter's fragmentation" (318), the postmodern syndrome of otherness and self-dissipation in a globalized world. In the same sense, Belasco notices, "as the world seems to spin helplessly from one major political crisis to another", people "look for ways to assert some control over their lives" (6), and understanding the specific mechanisms of foodways can be such a modality of tracing some solid identity landmarks. Furthermore, a cultural approach to culinary habits can also contribute to a better understanding of *the other*, so important in the nowadays' multiethnic societies.

Indeed, in this postmodern context of globalization, characterized by massive migratory movements, the concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization introduced by Deleuze and Guattari seem more than ever appropriate: "flows of property that is sold, flows of money that circulates, flows of production and means of production making ready in the shadows, flows of workers becoming deterritorialized: the encounter of all these flows will be necessary, their conjunction, and their reaction on one another" (223–224). Thus, the connections between people, their culture and their territory are constantly weakened, displaced, and reconstructed. The same processes are even more visible in the case of food, whose deterritorialization and reterritorialization have become common, leading to the so-called global melting pot.

Thus, the specific recipes of *the other*, of certain ethnic groups are being changed and internationalized or adapted to each different country in a completely different manner, customized and tailored so that they correspond to the local tastes. Wherever they go, immigrants try to preserve their food culture, as one of the most important marker of their identity, because food "is a medium to build families, religious communities, ethnic boundaries and a consciousness of history" (Wilk 4). They even manage to contaminate the host nation with their specific food products or practices (as happened with the Chinese, Mexican or Indian food in so many countries). However, the oneness and the specificity of a product consist of the way the ingredients are mixed and the processing techniques—even if the same ingredients—are recombined, transfigured, passed through the filter of a specific sensitivity and culture to create *something else*, which harmonizes better with the particular framework where it emerges.

For instance, despite the fact that the tea ceremony was taken over from the Chinese, the Japanese were the ones who transformed it into a national icon. On the other hand, most of the Chinese food sold in America or the United Kingdom does not resemble at all the original

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recipes eaten in the home country; it lost its "Chineseness" in favour of "Bristishness" or "Americaness." The Italians also despise and deny the pizza with fried potatoes or with ketchup, which has been deterritorialized and reterritorialized so many times. They also claim that spaghetti Bolognese is not even a copy of the original dish; in fact, this kind of spaghetti has never existed in Bologna, where the meat sauce (ragù) was served with tagliatelle or lasagna. This is an example of the Baudrillardian hyperreal—according to his definition of the concept of *hyperreal* as "the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (1733)—of taste also created by mass-media.

Furthermore, as Baudrillard mentioned in his comments upon Borges's allegory, "the territory no longer precedes the map," it is a *precession of simulacra* (1733). Nowadays most people in the developing and developed countries have experienced the taste of otherness, ordering or even cooking foreign recipes, distorted copies of the original which they may never get to know. The culinary identity of the ethnic groups—local, regional or national—is hence threatened by alterity. The danger is, if certain specific food practices and traditions are too much popularized and widespread, and if the copy prevails, to reach a point when the proliferation of simulacrum, of second, third, or …*n* degree, to be entirely dissipated and lost.

Speaking of taste, hyperreal, and simulacrum, the contributions of molecular gastronomy are to be considered in this context. Molecular gastronomy has transformed the kitchen into true alchemy laboratory, in which science offers new principles of cooking, dissolving, subliming, and transfiguring the deep structures of food products and creating a confusion of the senses. Molecular gastronomy is, for the moment, the climax of the postmodern physiology of taste, offering unexpected associations of textures and fragrances, extreme sensorial simulacra: coffee, melon, or Cointreau-flavoured fake caviar, made up of sodium alginate and calcium, liquid popcorn with caramel froth, balsamic vinegar pearls, spaghetti made of jellified tomato soup, parmesan ice cream or chocolate cigars filled with ice cream, solid or paper cocktails, cocktail marshmallows (for more surprising recipes see "What is Molecular Gastronomy?"), and the list is open to multiple hyperreal and playful combinations, emerged from the game of science and imagination.

The contributions of science in the last decades to the development of innovative foods are overwhelming, but with controversial effects. For example, the edible packaging has been invented: David Edwards, a Harvard scientist, created with his team the ice cream in an edible chocolate skin that does not melt, and thus no additional packaging is needed. The innovative edible shell is aimed to protect the ecosystem from dangerous plastic waste. At the same time, it has the effect of sense confusion by means of the reality of taste. In this regard, another example is the edible packaging that imitates nature, creating a perfect credible simulacrum: it has the shape of some fruit and is filled with juice of that particular fruit (pear, orange, and apple). There is also the wine-filled grape (Berger 2012), which surprises and tricks the taste buds in a postmodern hallucinating game, offering a liquid substance when the expectance is for a solid one.

Yet, the simulacrum is taken beyond the limits with the invention of artificial food, which perfectly imitates the original: scientists have already created synthetic rice, eggs, and even meat, which taste and look like the natural versions. The adversaries of this lab-grown food are answered that people have already been eating non-natural products, made up of chemical substances replacing the original ingredients, for a long time: no-milk yoghurt, no-egg mayonnaise, no-cocoa-butter chocolate etc. The question whether the food pills initially created for astronauts could replace common meals in future has been frequently asked. It has been argued that artificial products could offer a possible solution to the famine that still exists in large areas of the world.

Moreover, the scientists are on the verge of creating an even more challenging hyperreality of senses, inventing devices which can connect electrical and digital signals to

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the tongue and the nose, so that people can experience the taste and smell artificially, while using the mobile phones. Thus, someone could send a smell message or associate the image of a certain recipe with a real-like smell. Adrian Cheok, Professor at City University London, emphasizes the fact that smell and taste are connected to the limbic system of our brain—which is responsible for emotions and memory—and activating these senses can trigger emotions and memories subconsciously ("Using mobiles to smell," 2014). Consequently, the use of these devices would be interesting for instance for the advertising and food industry.

In the same regard, at the IEEE Virtual Reality conference in Orlando, Florida, held in March 2013, some researchers at Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology (TUAT) have presented a smelling screen, which produces smell on the image of a food product. Thus, the viewer can enjoy the realistic smell of hot coffee as if coming out from the cup of coffee displayed on the screen (Owano 2013). Taking into account this fast development of research in this field, the moment when people will be able to taste virtual food seems not far away. Could the simulacrum replace the real for good, and could the taste hyperreality become the new reality?

In order to understand the meanings of culinary identity and otherness in the postmodern kaleidoscopic society, it would be important to apply the concept of *archaeology*—used in the sense of Foucault's terminology (183)—*of food*. This would be the diachronic study of the culinary practices of a certain local or national group from multiple points of view (anthropological, sociological, philosophical, etc.), as well as the study of the production of networks of constantly changing meanings created by groups while applying the ordinary food practices in their daily life. The focus would be on the gaps and discontinuities that might provide the researched answers, revealing the Foucauldian *power/knowledge relationship*.

In this regard, in today's postmodern society this relationship has multiple facets. For example, at the level of government certain instruments of control and protection of food knowledge have been implemented. Thus, the systems of certification regarding the origin of the products function not only as a food security instrument of control of traceability, but also as a means of recognition of the local food culture. Furthermore, many national requests have been made so that food heritage should also be included on UNESCO *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* (which comprises worldwide various cultural practices), in order to provide communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity. Consequently, in 2010, the gastronomic meal of the French was inscribed on this list, followed in 2013 by the Mediterranean diet of Cyprus, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, by Turkish coffee culture and tradition, and by washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year. All these practices are transmitted from generation to generation, particularly through families ("Lists of intangible cultural heritage"). They play an important social role within the community and represent significant cultural and culinary identity markers, mirroring at the same time the power/knowledge relationship.

At the level of business and media, the power/knowledge relationship concerns more the consumerism practices and it is reinforced and officially acknowledged through its institutionalization. Thus, the educational system has the role to validate its importance, as food studies have been promoted in many famous universities all over the world (such as Boston University Gastronomy Master program and New York University's program in Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health) or in newly founded institutions and associations (Università di Scienze Gastronomiche in Italy, the Institut Européen d'Histoire et des Cultures de l'Alimentation, in France).

Undoubtedly, the contribution of mass-media was decisive for developing the power/knowledge relationship as regards the culinary identity. Television, for instance, has

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been promoting through all its channels travel and cooking shows, choices and recommendations of famous chefs, aspects of ethnic and national cuisines, stressing the importance to rediscover or to reconstruct a certain culinary identity. Paradoxically, cooking, which was considered some time ago a burden, or a duty reserved to the slaves, servants or the poor, has become everyone's favorite activity, even of the elites. In most developed or developing countries there is a proliferation of TV channels and programs, websites, magazines, journals, books dedicated to the relationship between food and identity—from gastronomical guides to culinary anthropology and imagology, food sociology and psychology or food history works.

Besides the numerous food TV channels and programs, the flourishing magazines, cookbooks, travel and food guides dedicated to the same issue, internet also plays its part in the power/knowledge complex equation in this field. In particular, the cooking blogs and the web food travelogues contribute to the construct of a globalized culinary identity. The constant share of recipes, accompanied or not by copyright or original source reference, but almost always by minor or major modifications, leads to a hyperreal of taste. The referent is thus constantly transformed, and sometimes no longer anchored in reality, but dissipated in the virtual network space.

At the same time, the food and travel blogs and television shows, which approach the culinary identity from multiple perspectives, reflect, in fact, Lyotard's theory about the end of "grand narratives," as the focus often lays on *les petits récits* of the travelers (Lyotard 32), whose accounts concerning the alimentation habits encountered during their voyages disclose significant aspects. The pieces of information they offer on the food practices of *the other* can cover the "absences and fractures"—as terms characteristic for the postmodernist discourse (Hassan 283), the gaps in the texture of the culinary construct of a specific group. These fragmentary reports help to assess and reconstruct the culinary identity from new perspectives. Their judgments are, in fact, a reflection of the way *the other* is perceived in the intimacy of the act of eating other things, in a different way. Moreover, from all the habits that a traveler encounters in a certain community, those regarding food can be the most shocking and the best remembered, disclosing novel facets of identity and otherness.

On the other hand, the culinary identity of a group can be reflected distortedly in the hyperreality offered by the screen. Since its multiple pieces are frequently deconstructed, decomposed and composed, the created effect of relativity and instability, the proliferation of forms can endanger the selfhood. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have noticed, in the culture industry "the individual is an illusion" (40). Furthermore, in the globalized society, even certain ethnic or social groups can become an illusion, a mere artifact. According to Brian McHale, postmodernism considers less important the object of representation, focusing instead on the meta-object, on the discursive constructs (4). Thus, the culinary identity of a certain group is usually built kaleidoscopically by mass-media, depending on shifting points of view and often having no connection with the reality.

Besides the subsidiary economic grounds, the rise of this phenomenon of world interest for what we eat reveals a psychological symptom of our identity quest: our culinary choices could represent a stable anchor or even an identity manifesto in a world whose evanescence is felt as threatening to the individual's inner stability. Food studies, through their interdisciplinary approach, could, however, provide a better understanding of the evolution of the group culinary identity and an assessment of its role in the construction of a certain local or national selfhood.

The culinary identity in the current globalized world—as it is constantly deterritorialized and reterritorialized—displays many postmodernist facets: fragmentarity, heterogeneity, discontinuity, dispersion, and indeterminacy. Thus, the culinary identity of the ethnic groups (local, regional or national) is often threatened by simulacrum and alterity, being built and

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rebuilt from multiple perspectives. At the same time, the increasing interest for food issues in various fields of the society (academic, governmental, business, mass-media) reveals—besides the many implications of the power/knowledge relationship—the fact that culinary identity may function as a major landmark in the context of permanent global changes.

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