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Reading (Italian American) Material Culture in the Work of Louise DeSalvo

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Abstract

This paper proposes a reading of Louise DeSalvo's work from a material culture perspective. In the first place, I consider how women were conceived of as objects in Italian American families, by looking at DeSalvo's memoir writing; specifically, in *Vertigo* (1996) and *Chasing Ghosts: A Memoir of a Father, Gone to Work* (2016). In the second place, informed by DeSalvo's theoretical writing (*Writing as a Way of Healing*, 1999), I will address what I term the *material texture* of her writing, that is to say, the ability to involve – and take inspiration from – material things in the process of writing. Lastly, following Irina D. Mihalache and Elizabeth Zanoni, I will draw on the idea of *food's materialities* (4) – and their three interrelated facets (food, environments, and representations) – to investigate how DeSalvo – as a third-generation Italian American woman – tackled questions of food preparation and consumption in *Crazy in the Kitchen* (2004). In this fashion, the article complements the work on the interrelationship between materiality and identity, by offering an alternative reading of its diverse textual representations.

Keywords: *Chasing Ghosts*, *Crazy in the Kitchen*, Louise DeSalvo, material culture, memoir writing, *Vertigo*

Louise DeSalvo'nun Eserlerinde İtalyan Amerikalı Maddi Kültürünü Okumak

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Öz

Bu makale Louise DeSalvo'nun çalışmalarını maddi kültür perspektifinden inceler. Öncelikle, başta *Vertigo* (1996) ve *Chasing Ghosts: A Memoir of a Father, Gone to Work* (2016) olmak üzere, DeSalvo'nun anılarından yola çıkarak İtalyan Amerikalı ailelerde kadınların nasıl birer nesne olarak algılandığını ele alacağım. Daha sonra, DeSalvo'nun kuramsal metinlerinden (*Writing as a Way of Healing*, 1999) yararlanarak, onun yazılarındaki *maddi doku* olarak ifade ettiğim özelliklere, yani yazma sürecinde nesneleri kullanmasına ve onlardan esinlenmesine değineceğim. Son olarak, Irina D. Mihalache ve Elizabeth Zanoni'yi izleyerek, *Crazy in the Kitchen*'da (2004), DeSalvo'nun, üçüncü nesil İtalyan Amerikalı bir kadın olarak, yemek hazırlama ve tüketimiyle ilgili sorunlarla nasıl baş ettiğini incelemek için yemeğin maddeselliği (4) fikri ve bu fikrin birbiriyle ilişkili üç yönü (yemek, çevre ve temsil) üzerinde duracağım. Makale böylece, farklı metinsel temsillerin alternatif bir okumasını sunarak maddi kültür ve kimlik arasındaki ilişki üzerine yapılan çalışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anı yazını, *Chasing Ghosts*, *Crazy in the Kitchen*, Louise DeSalvo, maddi kültür, *Vertigo*

Encoding *Things* with (Patriarchal) Significance in Louise DeSalvo's Memoir Writing

In her seminal essay "A Portrait of the *Puttana* as a Middle-Aged Woolf Scholar" (1984), Italian American writer Louise DeSalvo states: "I come from a family, from a cultural heritage, where women simply don't go away to do things separately from men. That is not to say that men don't go away to do things separately from women.

They do" (35). In making this declaration, she hints at the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres whereby women are tied up to domesticity as the Patmorian angels in the house (Hartnell 458). Accordingly, DeSalvo describes how she felt uncomfortable not being able to fit into the Italian American tradition of women as pasta makers; specifically, when she decided to pursue academic excellence by enrolling in a PhD program, she had to leave the domestic space she was assigned at birth, which led to the definite crossing of the threshold dividing proper from improper femininity: "You can imagine the way I felt as I flew high above the Atlantic. There I was, a *puttana*, alone at last" (DeSalvo, "*Puttana*" 36).

As Edvige Giunta has rightly pointed out, the "*Puttana*" essay helped DeSalvo realize "that she was leaving the safe academic haven of textual scholarship to 'came out,' as she puts it, as an Italian American working-class woman who could not claim a legitimate place in the snobbish and hierarchical world of literary scholarship" (xx). Though she was initially afraid of voicing concerns about intersectional discrimination, DeSalvo eventually decided to give a full account of her story by turning the "*Puttana*" essay into a memoir, namely *Vertigo* (1996). The by-now huge body of scholarship on *Vertigo* has sought to analyze it from several methodological perspectives – e.g., transnational studies (Romeo), trauma studies (Covino), and pain studies (Capalbo) – which nevertheless fail to grasp how Italian American matrilineality is both conceived of and questioned in the continuum of her life writing. In this regard, Mary Jo Bona has recently advanced a tentative reading of the mother-daughter bond which, whilst mentioning *en passant* the role of the "patriarchal family structure in post-World War II America" (392), focuses on "the specter of clinical depression" (392) looming over DeSalvo's mother and sister. And yet, I contend that from a material culture perspective,[1] Louise DeSalvo's memoir writing can open up new paths towards an understanding of the relationship between women and materiality; for instance, following Arjun Appadurai's proposal, if "human actors encode things with significance" (5), it goes without saying that things – or, broadly speaking, the home as a material site under male control – are vehicles for the oppression of women.

In the chapter entitled "Combat Zones," DeSalvo reexperiences her childhood by looking at past pictures of herself: "I am fourteen months old when my father goes away to war. I have no memory of

this event. In the pictures that are taken of me just after my father goes to war, I look shell-shocked" (*Vertigo* 49). The critical reflection on her past – what Julia Breitbach has otherwise called "the narrative edifice of one's life story" (37) – is thus enhanced by the very material support of the photographic image[2] which reconnects DeSalvo with a perceiving subject, namely her father. After picturing the wartime lives of children and women as a period of relative happiness and freedom, an issue which has been read by Kym Ragusa as at once linking DeSalvo's family history to the history of the United States at large (Ragusa 108), she specifically details what happened upon the return of her father from the war front; she felt dispossessed of the safe space she had inhabited until then with her mother. She harbored such a deep resentment against her father that her rage also extended towards the gifts received from him: "I took to 'punishing' this doll for being a very bad girl by scraping her face against the bricks of the building across the street" (*Vertigo* 58).

Against this backdrop, the photographic medium proves to rebut DeSalvo's memories: "This is how I remember I felt when my father came home, but the photos taken of my father and me after the war tell a different story" (*Vertigo* 60). In other words, the photo-as-object has captured DeSalvo and her father as happy subjects; it is only DeSalvo's narrative that discloses what is hidden behind the surface or, to use Bill Brown's words, what exceeds its mere materialization as an object, "the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems" ("Thing Theory" 5). Indeed, the Janus-faced nature of photography helps DeSalvo cope with conflicting feelings and realize how, in challenging her father's authority, she was trying to emulate his leading "the cavalry charge" (*Vertigo* 106) for a feminist purpose: to redeem herself and her family's women from the subaltern position to which they were confined.

The patriarchal attitude of her father is even more visible when she takes the chance to look at her parents' honeymoon photos: "My father is relaxed and happy, grinning broadly, proud to have married such a hard-working woman, such a serious woman, such a well-dressed woman, such a faithful and loyal woman, such a beautiful woman" (*Vertigo* 43-4). The very syntactical construction – via hypotaxis – of this passage, together with the repetition of the word *such*, highlights the objectification of women within the bounds of a conventional heterosexual marriage between two individuals of Italian descent: DeSalvo's father performs his dominant masculinity in his proud look

for having conquered – rather than married – a woman adhering to the expectations placed on Italian American women. Indeed, compared to the wide – toxic – grin on his face, DeSalvo's mother – and her weak smile – seems nearly lifeless in the pictures she describes: "But there seems no gaiety, no pleasure at all in my mother in the pictures my father has taken of her on their honeymoon, though she manages a weak smile" (*Vertigo* 44).

When DeSalvo's father takes on the role of photographer, we witness the full objectification of his wife because, although she is "oblivious to him" (*Vertigo* 45), he can decide how to frame the woman's body in a bathing suit. As Susan Sontag has pointed out: "Having a camera has transformed one person into something active, a voyeur: only he has mastered the situation" (7). And yet, in that same picture, DeSalvo's mother "is concentrating intently on a piece of writing" (*Vertigo* 45), just as DeSalvo herself would do later: "There are innumerable photographs my husband has taken of me throughout my life in precisely this pose" (*Vertigo* 46). DeSalvo identifies the act of writing as a way of creating a safe space to stand against the voyeuristic – and patriarchal – gaze of the photographer; this is because the picture can immortalize – and objectify – the *material* body, but it cannot grasp written words and – by proxy – the woman's individuality.

If *Vertigo* – and the extensive hermeneutical work on it – pictures DeSalvo as living "in the shadow of an authoritarian father" (Patrona 176), as the years pass, she reconsiders her position. In 2016 DeSalvo published another memoir: *Chasing Ghosts: A Memoir of a Father, Gone to War*. Compared to previous autobiographical writings, which are relatively narrow in scope (e.g. *Breathless*, 1997), *Chasing Ghosts* proves to connect directly to *Vertigo* as it reworks war contents from a quite different perspective, whereby the reading of canonical war reports is substituted for her father's first-hand account of those years. Indeed, whilst in *Vertigo* DeSalvo sought to understand World War II by reading Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), since this was an issue that her father "won't talk about" (*Vertigo* 6), in *Chasing Ghosts* that same father is willing to share war stories, which were nevertheless affected by post-traumatic stress disorder and so were "brief, sporadic, disjointed, attenuated" (*Chasing Ghosts* 10).

In Part 2, the connection between *Vertigo* and *Chasing Ghosts* is straightforward: in the former, there is a chapter entitled "Safe Houses,"

where DeSalvo details the "shock of being torn away" (*Vertigo* 92) from Hoboken to Ridgefield in 1949; in the latter, "Safe House" goes back to 1941, when her parents – just before the wedding – were looking for an apartment in Hoboken, where they put down roots. On the one hand, DeSalvo illustrates the transition from "her parents' Old World ways to the modern way of life she and my father would create together" (*Chasing Ghosts* 111), that is to say, from the first Italian generation to the second Italian American generation, which tried to decorate houses by taking inspiration from the (American) illustrations in women's magazines. On the other hand, DeSalvo accounts for the marriage of her parents – on 6 July 1941 – and the subsequent honeymoon. Here she gives us more details about those photographs described in *Vertigo*; specifically, she integrates her reflection into her father's testimony, heading towards a new understanding of the husband-wife bond: "I sense, but don't say, that this honeymoon marks a turning point in my parents' relationship, for from now on my mother will have to reckon with a man who is obsessed with warfare, and that from now on my father will have to reckon with a woman who despises armed conflict and who is far more fragile than he imagined" (*Chasing Ghosts* 117).

This does indeed prove to be a turning point because, from then on, DeSalvo's father would treat his wife as a burden or, to use Bill Maurer's words: "Women . . . were reduced to their bare, or, one should say fertile, materiality, and not treated as social subjects" (20). Indeed, to ease his wife's terror about the war, DeSalvo's father starts thinking about having a child before going away to war. Setting aside his actual departure, which charged DeSalvo's mother with the responsibility of looking after her baby girl alone, what interests me is the post-partum depression that DeSalvo's mother is subjected to; indeed, upon expressing concern for his wife's unusual behavior in the hospital, following a tradition which dates back to seventeenth- and eighteenth century medical treatments for birth, the doctor "assured my father that many women have a hard time adjusting to motherhood after giving birth and that she would soon snap out of it" (*Chasing Ghosts* 143). The verb *adjust*, which refers to changing something slightly to make it work better, fosters the usage of the metaphor of the woman's body as a machine and the doctor as "the supervisor or foreman of the labor process" (Martin 63). After marriage, women turn into inanimate matter, and the description that DeSalvo gives us is particularly striking: "She'd lie in bed, staring at the wallpaper, wrapped in her pink chenille

bathrobe, wasted milk leaking from her breasts, drying and crusting and making her nipples bleed . . . falling into a deep sleep that was not so much rest as oblivion" (*Chasing Ghosts* 144). In this image, whilst the baby feeds off her mother, her body starts deteriorating up to the point that the woman also loses her nurturing function; in place of receiving milk from her mother, DeSalvo's father has to feed his daughter with formula, and it is again via the photographic medium that we witness this inability to answer to her *natural functions*: "There are no pictures of her smiling . . . And there are no pictures of her holding me" (*Chasing Ghosts* 146). Missing this "rite of family life" (Sontag 6) – at this stage – signals what Sontag defines as "parental indifference" (6).

Listening to these stories helps DeSalvo revalue the figure of her father: "Because the effect his story had on me was to unravel my hatred of him, a hatred that I had carried for years" (*Chasing Ghosts* 146). And yet, she cannot deny the fear she felt every time his rage blasted, making his home unsafe by significantly throwing *things*: "Plates. Knives. Forks. Saucepans . . . Sometimes he is satisfied with breaking things or ripping things apart. Crockery. Chairs. Books. Magazines" (*Chasing Ghosts* 203). The patriarchal control over women is thus enhanced by the regulation of their bodies as well as the mis- and over-use of the familiar space they inhabit – plenty of those *personal effects* which DeSalvo explicitly mentions at the very end of *Vertigo* and within her body of memoir writing. In this light, the mixing up of photography and testimony in *Chasing Ghosts* grants DeSalvo the opportunity to resemiotize her memories.

Intermezzo: Writing as a Fixer of Things Past, and Other-Than-Past

Writing memoirs fostered, in DeSalvo, an urgency to critically reflect upon the very act of writing, and the key text in this regard is *Writing as a Way of Healing* (1999); whilst I agree with Peter Covino when he states that it "functions as a theoretical and creative treatise that positions and interrogates the socio-political dimensions of much of DeSalvo's earlier work" (52), I do believe that *Writing as a Way of Healing* also paved the way for later considerations of her life as an Italian American woman. In other words, it does not merely serve a

retrospective purpose, but it marks a new beginning for DeSalvo in terms of self-representation. She starts thinking about the act of writing life – and authoring a text about it – as textured (*Healing* 6): as Halliday and Hasan have pointed out, "the concept of texture is entirely appropriate to express the property of 'being a text'" (2), when conceived of as a semantic unity made of linguistic features which give it coherence and cohesion. In this light, I argue that the material turn can shed new light on the reading that DeSalvo proposes of the dialectics between text and texture: specifically, apart from the similarities between linguistic texture and matter, in its broader meaning of "the substance of anything" (Williams 164), we could say that DeSalvo draws on what we might call *material texture*, the latter being understood as the ability to involve – and take inspiration from – material things in the process of writing.

In Part 1, Chapter 1, the idea of texture is implicitly embedded in the comparison between writing and the *fixer*: "As in photography, writing acts for me as a kind of fixer, like the chemical – the fixer – you use to stabilize the image" (*Healing* 6). This metaphor proves successful if we think of how *Vertigo* and *Chasing Ghosts* helped DeSalvo *stabilize* – i.e., to give texture to – the image of her father: going beyond the "narrowly selective transparency" (Sontag 4) of photography, she had the chance to "discover deeper and more complex truths" (*Healing* 11) by bringing back and shaping memories coherently. Nevertheless, creating texture is neither a homogenizing nor a straightforward process: patterns of texture are generated and revised in due time. As DeSalvo herself remarks: "If you're not ready to write about something, don't, yet; you will when you're ready" (*Healing* 16).

In Part 1, Chapter 5, when structuring her argument about the healing power of the writing process, DeSalvo recalls the time preceding the starting of her career as a memoirist to get at what triggered that event: "In the year before I started writing my first book, I became interested in Japanese Zen *ensō*, or circle paintings, and, through this, in Japanese ideas about the creative process" (*Healing* 69). Current scholarship investigating the relationship between writing and healing in DeSalvo (e.g., Hodges Hamilton) has overlooked this *material* detail, which constituted a turning point in the way she commingled different aesthetic traditions to conceptualize her idea of art writing. She states that: "Zen artists and writers devote themselves

to an orderly, contemplative way of life that prepares them for their work. But . . . their work, too, becomes a form of meditation. Work and life are deeply integrated" (*Healing* 70). In this sense, DeSalvo saw writing not as an academic duty but as an integral and *slow* part of her life: indeed, the idea of writing across one's life course means – by proxy – that writing itself is not a sporadic activity, but rather a "slow writing path" (*Slow Writing* 23).

As such, writing progresses through several stages, amongst which, in line with the conceptual focus of this special issue, I am concerned with the germination stage. During this stage "we gather and work on fragments of ideas, images, phrases, scenes, moments, lines, possibilities for plots, characters, settings" (*Healing* 110). In DeSalvo's case, two objects inspire each session: "A ballpoint pen with an angel on its cap for making manuscript corrections; a used brick I bought . . . at Hemingway's house in Key West, Florida, ostensibly from a building that had fallen into despair, which I use as a paperweight" (*Healing* 127-8). Objects seem thus to take on an active role since they act as catalysts for writing: considering the *vexata quaestio* object-thing (Parlati 10-1), we could probably say that these inanimate *objects* – specifically, following Appadurai's insights, commodities for their being "objects of economic value" (3) – turn into *things* "richly networked, used, felt, sustaining" (Yates 33).

During the germination phase, apart from the ballpoint pen and the used brick which serve as talismans fostering the writing process, there are also those material things that directly connect to the individual's past and, in so doing, they "seem magical" (*Healing* 127); for instance, DeSalvo recounts how a copy of the *New York Times* from her birth date triggered "images and ideas" (*Healing* 129) for picturing the time men left their wives and children for the war front (e.g. the chapter "Finding My Way" in *Vertigo*). The reference to the *magical* power of things is not to be taken for granted because, as Peter J. Pels has pointed out, things are perceived as magical when they "exert agency beyond or against human intentions" (613).

Besides, in Part 3, Chapter 10, DeSalvo presents the act of writing as a "healing partnership" (*Healing* 179). Again, it is an art object that stirs this reflection: "I stand in front of an Ethiopian healing scroll, an iconic drawing of geometric shapes and five sets of eyes and written prayers and invocations . . . Ethiopia has a thousand-

year tradition of using words and images to cure illness or heal the spirit of the stricken person if a physical cure isn't possible" (*Healing* 178). As for the Japanese Zen *ensō*, in response to these aesthetically-moving forms – what Timothy Carroll otherwise called "significant form" (385) – DeSalvo parallels the process of making one's scroll to that of writing and, more importantly, she advanced the idea that such a process "would act as a permanent record of my journey" (*Healing* 180), thus extending questions of preservation and sharing from museums (Stocking) to writing and its material support. Hence, DeSalvo's systematization of life writing as a genre is grounded on cherishing the slowness of the process itself and on the material texture underlying it which, far from being irrevocable and homogeneous, is communal, stratified, and always in the making.

"Wild Things" on the Table: Food Preparation and Consumption in *Crazy in the Kitchen* (2004)

In 2004 DeSalvo published *Crazy in the Kitchen: Food, Feuds, and Forgiveness in an Italian American Family*. Paratextual elements – notably the prologue "Wild Things" – signal in advance the new materiality characterizing this memoir: "There were wild things in my grandparents' stories about the Mezzogiorno, the South of Italy, the land that they came from so many years ago, always wild things" (*Crazy* 1). Here *wild* is intended to refer to the property of something very unusual but attractive; apart from animals such as jackasses and wolves, DeSalvo zooms in on the wilderness of Italian vegetables, which are mentioned in a non-standard Italian variety – e.g., *cicorielle* (*Crazy* 4) – accompanied by a description in English. This serves a specific purpose, that is, the framing of DeSalvo's account in the South of Italy, between Puglia and Sicily: as Maddalena Tirabassi has pointed out, the different living conditions in northern and southern regions implied a differentiation in terms of diet. So, whilst the former could count on some protein (e.g., milk and cheese), the latter mainly ate bread, olive oil, and vegetables (120).

The discourse on the importance of food gives way – by proxy – to a reflection on what it means to lack food; accordingly, if home is where food is granted, then the lack of food is what compels people to find a home elsewhere, as was the case with the first wave of Italian

migrants heading towards the United States "to scavenge for food in other places" (*Crazy* 5). The prologue is thus key to introducing a new understanding of memoir writing, this time based on the intersections between food and identity across three generations of Italian Americans (Ottaviano 130). Given the impetus of this special number, I consider food's materialities and their three interrelated facets: food, environments, and representations. As Irina D. Mihalache and Elizabeth Zanoni have pointed out: "This model places food itself . . . at the center of material cultures – it considers the environments . . . where food is produced, consumed, articulated, or challenged, and differentiates between the many systems of representation" (4).

Part 1 is centered on the bread: "My grandmother is in the kitchen cutting the Italian bread that she has made . . . A bread that my mother disdains because it is everything that my mother, in 1950s suburban New Jersey, is trying very hard not to be" (*Crazy* 9). As such, the interrelationship between food and identity "bears historical, social, and cultural significance" (Gardaphé and Xu 5); DeSalvo's mother distances herself from that food to embrace the host culture. Indeed, DeSalvo compares the Italian bread to its American counterpart, which is significantly termed "the other bread" (*Crazy* 12), thus calling to mind Adorno's stance on objectivity (189-94) and the necessity, as Brown puts it, of "accepting the otherness of things [as] the condition for accepting otherness as such" ("Thing Theory" 12). In this case, there is a first-generation woman who does not accept this otherness and proudly lives as an Italian in America; conversely, her daughter – a second-generation woman – longs for that otherness in as much as fully rejecting her ethnic identity: "Maybe my mother thinks that if she eats enough of this other bread, she will stop being Italian American and she will become American American" (*Crazy* 13).

As stated above, apart from food itself, "environments . . . are the second critical facet of food's material cultures" (Mihalache and Zanoni 8); indeed, the making of food happens in a specific area – the kitchen – which gives way to the intergenerational fight: "My grandmother's bread . . . is a bread that my grandmother makes by hand in my mother's kitchen, much to my mother's disgust" (*Crazy* 19). Such an emplaced fight is complicated by the usages of other material manifestations, such as knives: "The knife that my grandmother uses to cut the bread is a butcher knife . . . To her, the only way to cut the bread was to pull the knife through the bread toward your heart" (*Crazy*

30). This act semanticizes the knife in a way that threatens DeSalvo's mother, who feels that it possesses a representational function opposite to the American paradigm, and so she shouts: "Why can't you cut that goddamned bread like a normal human being?" (*Crazy* 31).

This reticent attitude of DeSalvo's mother is later explained in the chapter "Slicing Onions," where she is caught using the knife to cut and chop the onions she will then add to the Italian foods prepared on selected special occasions. In this case, DeSalvo wonders why her "mother didn't cry the way everyone cries when slicing an onion, the stinging, unbidden tears annoying the corners of the eyes . . . She *really* cried" (*Crazy* 33). If cooking requires engagement with objects and physical spaces, as well as body and mind, to succeed (Trubek 153), then the very material and infrastructural conditions in which DeSalvo's mother is living make traumatic events come to the surface: abuse; the mourning of family members who passed away; secondary victimhood. Her traumatic past comes to be intertwined with her neglected *Italianità* and the kitchen becomes the receptacle for all she abhorred in life, up to the point that her tears "became an ingredient of the food she prepared" (*Crazy* 37).

And yet, the spaces and places where food preparation happens also serve to tighten the bond between the first and the third generation of Italian American women; against her mother's will, Louise DeSalvo experienced the making of the bread as a rite of passage to embrace her *Italianità*: "The two of us, enveloped in a nimbus of flour, inhaling the yeasty, narcotic vapors that transport her to a little white village by the sea, where she returns in reverie . . . And when I travel to Italy after she dies, it is this bread, her bread, that I hope I will find there" (*Crazy* 23). Representations of bread are thus destined to last beyond time and space, turning their materiality into a psychic essence, and helping DeSalvo experience Italy as if she were already familiar with it; in other words, when she first visited Italy, she did so whilst having in mind the consistency, the smell, the memories associated with the making of the bread.

In Part 2, DeSalvo goes back in time to narrate and expand upon her memories of war; this effect-before-cause structure – which resembles *Vertigo* – is explicitly chosen by DeSalvo because it allows her to foreground the events that she experiences firsthand, as she states in *The Art of Slow Writing* (2014): "I started with a narrative about

how I made bread with one of my grandmothers. With each successive piece, I moved further back in time" (192). In this section, when relating how her grandfather contributed to the development of her sense of belonging to Italy, food enhances an act of communion between them: "I am sitting at my grandparents' kitchen table in Hoboken. My grandfather and I are drinking wine (mine diluted with water) and eating lupini beans for a snack . . . My grandfather tells me stories, in dialect" (*Crazy* 64). In this case, food can be seen as a cultural mediator between two individuals who do not share the same language; indeed, DeSalvo's grandfather only speaks Italian, and whilst DeSalvo can understand it, she speaks English only. Moreover, DeSalvo realizes that, during this time, when they were staying in Hoboken, before moving to Ridgefield, her mother had a different attitude towards Italian food because she enjoyed eating it: "She enjoys what he cooks. She has not yet developed her revulsion for the peasant fare he and my grandmother eat. This comes later when she moves to the suburbs and tries to put her Italian past behind her" (*Crazy* 67-8). In chronicling the move from Italian Hoboken to the more Americanized area of Ridgefield, having lost the support of her caring father, DeSalvo's mother felt deprived of love, so it is her father's death that is the turning point in the rejection of her ethnic identity.

When DeSalvo finally had the chance to visit Italy, she went through Italian culinary traditions in quite a different way compared to what she was accustomed to in the United States, because she was outside the familiar space of hers or her mother's kitchen. It is exactly what she ate – pasta and pizza – that made her understand how the idea of Italy she had was based on very personal memories, which did not represent Italy – or, at least, the Italian American heritage – as a whole, but it was a Southern Italian past she was attached to: "A pasta in the shape of a large teardrop, dressed with a sauce of cauliflower, bread crumbs, a touch of onion, a touch of anchovy. *Cicatelli con cavolfiore e mollica fritta* .... These are pastas I do not know; these are pastas my family never tested" (*Crazy* 140). Ingredients, tools, and physical space for cooking take on a different connotation when switching from domestic kitchens to public restaurants; this new dimension engenders what Brown has termed "misuse value" (*A Sense of Things* 75), which helps DeSalvo see how all that is concerned with Italian food is not reducible to everyday commodity relations. In this light, she starts cherishing her cooking environment and all those objects that inhabit

it and that have been recollected whilst journeying through Italy: "When we travel, we look for equipment and ingredients to lug home from wherever we've been – an authentic mortar and pestle (from Genoa, very heavy, carried by Ernie); salted capers (from Sicily, bought in Taormina) …; dried wild mushrooms (from Varese Ligure)" (*Crazy* 186). Thus, following Brown's insights again, the history *of* commodified things – purchased in Italy – is to be understood as the history *in* things, given the subsequent crystallization of feelings and memories that "linger there in the material object" ("How to Do Things" 935). Indeed, DeSalvo states: "I *love* all my cooking equipment. I talk to my appliances. I praise them for jobs well done . . . My kitchen is my refuge. My cooking makes my writing possible" (*Crazy* 186). In this light, near the end of *Crazy in the Kitchen*, we understand how the *affective* life of things, to loosely recall Appadurai's seminal work, is key to understanding DeSalvo's process of writing, which is tied up to her kitchen as a liminal place – connecting Italy and the United States, but also the image of the woman as a pasta maker to that of woman writer – fostering meditation and communion with *things past and other-than-past*.

Notes

[1] For an up-to-date overview of the many approaches to material culture studies within the Italian American context, see Ruberto and Sciorra.

[2] As Nancy Caronia remarks, the pictures DeSalvo meditates on have not been made public yet; they are "something those of us who write about DeSalvo theorize only" (Caronia, email correspondence, April 2017).

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